

Absolute Magnitude

Science Fiction

February 1997

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Editorial Notes by Warren Lapine

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Today my copy of **Absolute Magnitude** the anthology arrived from Tor Books. I'm very excited about this anthology; it showcases some of the best stories from our first nine issues. This is a truly remarkable and unprecedented thing. No other magazine has sold a "best of" anthology in such a short time. **Absolute Magnitude** has not had the money of a major corporation behind it yet we've still been able to attract some of the best writers in the field. Beyond that, we've been able to introduce a lot of new talent. There is something magical about **Absolute Magnitude** that is allowing us to break down a lot of traditional barriers faced by new small magazines.

In the history of science fiction, no magazine has ever made the leap from the small press to the professional market. It looks as though we may be the magazine that changes that. And, of course, we couldn't have done that without you, our readers. I want to thank you for your support and belief in this magazine; it's beginning to pay off in a big way and my appreciation knows no bounds. As the editor of **Absolute Magnitude**, I will endeavor to bring you the best most energetic magazine possible; and I promise to never become complacent as a result of our success.

You should be able to find a copy of **Absolute Magnitude**, the anthology, at your local bookstore. If they don't carry it you can order it. The ISBN is 0-312-86335-7. Pick up a copy and find out where we've been and then come back to the magazine and find out where we're going. Thus far, it's been a ride worth remembering, and I believe that the adventure is just beginning. There's still a lot of territory left for us to cover and I'm happy to have you along for the ride. And, as always, don't forget to fasten your seatbelts!



Absolute Magnitude

Science Fiction Adventures

PUBLISHER
Warren Lapine

EDITOR IN CHIEF/ART DIRECTOR
Warren Lapine

CONTRIBUTING EDITOR
Allen Steele

ASSOCIATE EDITORS
Kevin Rogers
Tim Ballou
Lucas Morton
Drew Hutcheson

ADAPTIVE TECHNOLOGIES
Joe Lazzaro

LAYOUT & DESIGN
Angela Kessler/Wilder Publications

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Absolute Magnitude

Science Fiction

Fall/Winter 1997

Issue #8

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Denise Lopes Heald's work has appeared in *Pirate Writings* and *Aboriginal*. Her book *Mistwalker* was a Del Rey Discovery novel. This is her fifth appearance in *Absolute Magnitude*.

The MACK and the Midget

by Denise Lopes Heald

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Blood pounded black holes in Shae's vision and pain contorted her already twisted spine. But she dodged and ran.

The concourse was mobbed with species packed against species; and glancing up, the faces she met were grim, their eyes unfocused. Exhaustion, desperation, numb endurance beat at her from every side, everyone just trying to get through, survive another commute crush. She stilled her empathic reception, darted between a Darmanian giant's legs, and bounced off a Roller sow's broad gut.

Agony shot down her spine, but she got through.

The Tinners were close this time. The beat guard that sounded the alarm on her just now had made her on visual alone. Damn, she was in trouble. An ARPS—one of the city's rolling maintenance bots—must have pixed her. Down in the ratways where she lived, trespassing in the city's service tunnels, the ARPS were everywhere and they chased her. Maybe their detection readouts classified her as a moving garbage glob.

Dim, yellow light bled from the soaring arch of the concourse's distant ceiling while dust, smoke and body smog rose up to fight the light, leaving everything below hazy and grey. At her level, where she dodged elbows, knees and assorted other appendages, the world was even darker.

Sweat ran on her face and puddled inside her bodysuit at her waist. Fighting for breath, she wormed through a momentary gap in the surrounding horde. *Gonna take you this time*, her mind insisted. *Gonna turn you into muck, you stupid, little, twisted piece of shit. Run!* She ran.

Scatter traffic screamed and whined in the sunken track that split the huge thoroughway, and speed lights glowed garish phantasms over the passing crowd. Shae watched the power rail dividing foot traffic from the vehicle track and was tempted by the easier going there where nervous creatures wouldn't walk. But she would be too exposed. So she pulled back, dove through a maze of legs and dangling garments and finally came cut battered and wheezing alongside the thoroughway's business row.

Music blared and lights flashed above a bar entrance. She lunged—not bothering to read the sign—slammed off a hairy body and bounced through the bar's entrance gate.

Resurfacing in the cool of the room beyond the gate was like breaking into air from a flooded ratway. The roar of the thoroughway vanished and the press of bodies fell away.

A strobe flashed toward the gate, and she slunk sideways into shadow. No one followed. She sensed passively, didn't dare do more with the Tinners and their alarms so near. But no one seemed to be giving her entrance any special attention yet.

Crowded tables filled the triangular room and a bar lined its back curve. From overhead, pojo music sounded beneath a low hum of conversation and clinking glasses.

She relaxed fractionally, blinked her eyes, and began to focus. Two things she noted instantly. First, there were weapons everywhere, all the same kind—lethal. Second, it was a mixed-species crowd. Her adrenaline heart pounded triple time. She hadn't realized she was so near the docks. She must be in D-zone, where carrying and public mixing were legal.

She cursed silently as the tension hit her. The crowd was quiet, but there were too many creatures here, all too alien to each other. The place felt like a powder-keg waiting to blow. There was even a bloody, freaky, massacring MACK drinking at the far corner of the bar. In the dark, its armored hide shimmered with reflected light.

She crouched lower. In here, she was meat for the taking. But a pair of drop poles were nestled along the room's side wall, and she headed for them. If she—

A whistle sounded high and sharp, and she hit the floor... crawled double time between boots, hooves and claws.

"Tinners," a hellish sounding voice growled above her head. "Friggin' shit Tinners."

Hate flooded the room, and she faltered beneath that outpouring of emotion generated by the police guards' appearance.

But a leg barring her way moved; and throwing up mental barriers, she crawled through the resultant gap. A second leg shifted, leaving her room to pass. Then a chair form spun out of her path. Ahhhh... The crowd was hiding her. On Vlasha, the police were everyone's enemy.

She bounced between floor-level barriers like a ball in a bad game of scrimmage while the Tinners prowled and the bar's patrons took some petty pleasure from thwarting the cops' pursuit. But then she ran out of legs to dodge and scrambled through a tunnel of form seats locked together, praying there were no Tinners close enough to see beneath the chairs.

Bang. Pain exploded through her skull.

She had slammed blind into a wall. The impact knocked her flat and she lay limp as a rag. The Tinners had her now.

But nothing happened, except the wall she had run into moved. And through a dizzying glitter of red pain, she realized she was one step from dying. Sucking air, she waited for the MACK to lift an armored boot and crush her head to mush.

It didn't. She peeked from beneath the chair that hid her. The MACK was drinking as if she didn't exist.

Maybe it hadn't felt her—

Its legs moved aside, opening a hollow at the thing's back. Her stomach dropped out and chill shivered through her.

She wriggled forward onto her feet, plastered herself into the corner—and the thing shifted back, pinned her to the wall.

Her bodysuit got real wet. But she held on and nothing else happened. The MACK stood still: didn't crush her, didn't shout or signal or give her away to the Tinners. Just gave its cloak a flip. The

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cloth settled over its shoulder and hung down around her head. *It was hiding her.*

She cowered back, sheltering in the shadow of the murderous mechanical MACK. It was a thing human-shaped and human-originated, but not human—a military madman's creation. Her teeth chattered and muscles spasmed the length of her spine. What game was it playing? How did she escape this?

MACKs were preserved offal—body pieces scraped off battlefields during the war and puzzled together with mechanical support to become killing machines for the government. But the war was done, and some bleeding-souled clergyman had procured a bill of rights for the things. So the *socially functional* ones, those that passed Social Service's psyche tests, mustered out to terrorize the society they were designed to defend.

She clenched her jaws to stop her teeth from chattering, afraid the noise would set the thing off or betray her to the Tiners. But then she thought no Tiner was going to get close enough to hear her, and even their sensors might not penetrate past the MACK to detect her.

But was the thing just waiting its time to sell her out? She could do nothing to prevent that.

Her legs ached and she let the crippled one crumple. But the MACK's massive thigh caught her as she slumped and held her against the wall.

All it had to do was lean back and she was dead. But maybe a smashed skull was the easy way out of all this.

And who knew what the MACK had in mind. She laughed silently. Who knew what *mind* it had in the MACK. That was the problem with the things. No one knew what they were made out of or how they were arranged. Most were human cortexed, but not all. An alien brain trying to cope with a human designed body was insanity on the prowl. *Shee-it.*

Still, this mack drank human-fashion, stood like a human, seemed at ease with its body. Just the fact that it was drinking implied a certain biology. She had heard that some MACKs were all one body. Some even had their original brain. Others were just machines, no more sane nor insane than anything mechanical.

What to do? There was nothing she could do, except wait.

Her head pounded and sweat trickled down her cheek. She had chosen this spot. She could have given herself over to the Tiners rather than worm in behind a MACK. Closing her eyes, she slipped a little lower, let her head rest against the thing, and began to relax.

What was she fussing over? Being here was all right. If the thing killed her, then it was over, clean and easy. But if she let the Tiners have her, the obscenity would go on forever. They would break her mind and use her to hunt down more ultrasentients. That was perversion worse than her body's deformity. Her parents had protected her from the genetic purists that would have killed her at birth. But she was a purist too . . . and no filth-brained Tiner was going to control her mind or take away her memories, no matter how much her memories hurt. She had as much right to living free as any MACK.

That thought started her crying, which was the stupidest, most useless thing she had done in five years. But she couldn't stop, only managed to keep the fit silent, her shrunken body curled into a sodden, stinking ball against the MACK's immaculate leggings. The lapse didn't last long. She centered mentally, dug her fists into her eyes and dried them.

When she looked up, the MACK was holding a brew behind its back above her head. A bit of foam dripped off the mug's bottom and

hit her in the face. She licked the slop and it tasted good. Having dared everything else, she took the mug from the thing's fist, settled back, and watched the armored hand disappear. Its helm tipped as it returned to its own drinking.

Bloody stars! She breathed through her shock and found strength enough to lift the mug to her lips. The brew was foul stuff, bitter and burning, but the cut of it was good . . . cleared her mind, steadied her quivering muscles.



The MACK and the Midget

So huddled and dazed, she drank with the MACK and quickly got drunk. It was all madness, but the searching Tinners kept their distance; and the MACK's feet, when they moved at all, moved carefully. Even better, her spine went slowly numb while her canted hip relaxed and her empty stomach filled up. She thought about eventualities—all that liquor going where it didn't belong—but she was too far gone to care. For the moment, things were almost pleasant and that was enough.

The pojo music started again. The hum of conversation rose. She sensed passively and decided the Tinners had left. What would the MACK do now? She should be scared. But the brew had put a distance between her and events, and she liked the way the MACK's cloak smelled of brew and armor polish.

The MACK shifted. Her stomach startled. But the armored legs leaned away, leaving her space to move at last. So she stretched and wriggled against the bar base getting comfortable. . . wasn't stupid enough to try running yet. The Tinners would be waiting for that mistake.

She dozed, then woke to unnatural quiet.

The Tinners were back. She could see uniformed legs winding a way through the empty tables surrounding the MACK.

Its legs shifted against her and she contracted into a ball. One set of uniformed legs moved nearer. She wondered what was up the guard's spine to take such a chance. There wasn't another creature in this room that wasn't giving the MACK a wide berth. The guard stopped just beyond the MACK's easy reach.

"We're looking for this woman. Have you seen her?" Apparently the Tinner was displaying a pix of her.

The MACK shifted and a very human sounding voice sounded from it in a growl. "You see any crap on my boots?"

She sensed the Tinner's panic without even trying.

"None." The cop choked.

"Haven't seen her then."

The Tinner's legs started backing and didn't stop until they reached a lift pole. The poles' escalators began hissing, and she knew the MACK had routed her pursuers.

She wasn't surprised. On a practical basis, a MACK was impervious. The only thing that would penetrate their hide was jinken acid. To use that, you had to be willing to sacrifice everything within a MACK's running range; because when the acid hit a nerve, they would spread the stuff. So MACKs weren't allowed many places. But where MACKs went, they were their own law. About all that kept them in line was dependence on the system to move them planet to planet.

She didn't know if the Tinners had detected her behind this MACK or not. If they had, she hoped she wasn't worth enough for them to tackle the fabricated monster here. They might. Sacrificing the bar and all its patrons wasn't beyond the Tinners' meager mentality.

Bamm. The MACK's boot slammed her crotch and lifted her off the floor. She didn't fight or squeal, couldn't even breathe. A fist knotted the front of her shirt, and the MACK turned, holding her on her feet. Her eyes just met its weapons belt.

"You a whore?" a voice sounded from it.

Gods above! "Yes," she whispered, mind screaming, cheek twitching, teeth clicking.

"You ever do a MACK?"

"No."

"You sleep with me?"

She could smell the brew rolling off its breath. It was bloody drunk. "Yes." Her voice squeaked higher.

"You that desperate? Want to live that bad?"

She let her breath out slow, quieted inside. She would not let it control her with fear the way the Tinners wanted to control her with drugs and kinetics.

"Yes." She held her voice level. "I'm that desperate. But I don't want to live that bad."

The grip on her shirt relaxed. The MACK's helm angled down as if it were studying her.

"You want me to kill you? They can't touch you then."

She thought on it. "I don't know. There's still all those fantasy ifs."

"Which ones? Which fantasy you want most?"

She swallowed against a dry throat. Answering the MACK was insane. She did anyway. "Being free. Letting my mind go its way." Her teeth chattered. She centered and controlled. Her voice got stronger. "Touching someone without them cringing away. Getting rid of the pain and the filth. Living like a human being again."

The MACK wavered on its feet, then squatted and brought its helm level with her face. "Lords woman, don't we all want that?"

Her jaw dropped. She stared. Then her mind bumped against something she couldn't quite grasp—

The MACK scooped her up. She didn't resist, had no place else to go.

It carried her out of the bar hidden beneath its cloak and stuffed under one arm like a rag. If there were Tinners waiting, she couldn't sense them, not through the suffocating energies of the thoroughway crowd. But no one stopped the MACK and it moved unhampered as everything fled its path.

Resting in its armored arms was like being held on pikes, except the arms curved to accommodate her twisted shape. Blind, she waited, had waited all her life, for something better.

They rode drop chutes and lifts, carriers and gliders as the MACK worked its way into smaller and smaller passages. Finally, they entered a quiet dim hall.

A door hissed open, then hissed closed. There was darkness and privacy. The mack dumped her onto what felt like a bed.

"Take off your clothes. You want light?"

She was tempted to say no, but if it was going to kill her, she wanted to see it coming. And if it was just going to use her body, she wanted to know what was attacking her.

Never give up until the dance is done. That's what her father had taught her.

"Yes. Light," she said, still dancing.

So the MACK tabbed up dim illumination that revealed the interior of an economy shelter unit, dockside's common lodging facility. There was a bed, grey-blue walls, grey matting on the floor. She had never given any thought to where a MACK would sleep or even if it slept. But such a room for it seemed as logical as anything else that had happened this day.

"What do you want?" she asked.

It waved toward the sanitary domes sticking out of the wall alongside the sitting form. "You. Clean."

That was reasonable. So she stripped as it had ordered, crawled off the end of the bed and into the shower dome. Cleaning was a healing thing, but she turned her back so she didn't have to look at the MACK staring at her deformed body. Water dripped down her spine and she imagined the creature's eyes assessing every knob and twist of her.

When she had done, she pulled a dry-sheet from a dispenser, wrapped it around herself and stepped out, never giving the MACK a glance until she was forced to turn back to the bed.

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He was sitting on it. The MACK encased him waist-down. Above that, he wore only his scars. No one had wasted cosmetic work on his face. She stared down into that hash of mottled twisted tissue and met his eyes. There were tears in them.

Her heart stuttered. She bit her lip.

"I'm drunk," he said softly. "Wouldn't have the nerve otherwise. You don't need to do anything. I just wanted someone to sleep with me... wanted a touch, someone, something."

He looked away. His muscled shoulders slumped, and the same shivering static she had felt in the bar bled from him. This time, she reached out for it, let no fear of Timers stop her.

Falling into his mind was like falling into heaven, if there was such a thing. She just hadn't been listening in the bar.

He looked up with tears streaming off his scarred chin. She touched his face and he didn't cringe away.

Alike, her mind breathed, amazed.

Yes, his thoughts pulsed back. Shivering, he smiled, tugged her canted body to him, kissed her forehead, smoothed the hair from her face. "Safe now," he whispered.

It was true.



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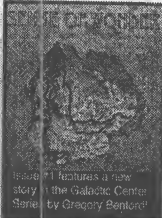
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Primary Ignition

The Merchants of Mars

by Allen Steele

By the time you read this—it's early March as I write—we'll either be celebrating a major milestone in the exploration of space, or trying to get over another embarrassing failure. I speak, of course, of NASA's two latest probes to Mars, *Global Surveyor* and *Pathfinder*.

By now, you already should be familiar with the details of this dual mission, so I won't reiterate all the stuff you've doubtless heard from the usual suspects: CNN, the network evening news, the more reliable major newspapers and weekly news magazines (although this time around, we won't have Carl Sagan explaining the latest Viking photos to Johnny Carson on the Tonight show... rest in peace, Dr. Sagan). Unless the Great Galactic Ghoul has snafued either probe—always a possibility, which we'll discuss shortly—we should be seeing the first new close-up images of Mars since 1976.

I have a certain personal interest in the *Pathfinder* mission for one of my children is aboard the lander. Writers often regard their literary works as o'Ispring, you see, and my first published story, "Live From The Mars Hotel," was one of the seventy science fiction tales of Mars selected by the Planetary Society to be recorded on a CD-ROM which was placed aboard *Pathfinder*. If all goes well, that disc will soon be on the red planet, and one day may be recovered by human explorers—provided, of course, that it doesn't shatter when *Pathfinder* bounces across the Martian surface like the biggest damn soccer ball in history. I rather enjoy the prospect of future Aresians reading my little fable of a retro-rock band performing in a Mars colony; I just hope that they don't laugh too hard.

An identical disc was aboard the Russia's ill-fated Mars 96 probe, but that was taken by the Ghoul before it even got halfway there. This is par for the course, like it or not; NASA's *Mars Observer* was lost in 1994 when it exploded just as it was about to enter orbit above the plane and both of the former Soviet Union's Phobos probes fubared in 1988. I don't have the track record in front of me, but about half of the probes launched to Mars since the early 1960's have been lost en route, leading NASA scientists to attribute the

failures to a mythical Great Galactic Ghoul: an interplanetary gremlin who finds these lonely robotic travellers and causes them to misfire their maneuvering rockets, blow up, or suffer other, near-inexplicable failures... or simply disappear without any further downlink. NASA people don't like talking about the Ghoul—you know what happens when you speak of the devil—but his presence has been felt time and again. Hopefully, he's taking a nap now.

If and when *Pathfinder* and its sister craft, *Global Surveyor*, begin transmitting data from the Martian surface, we can expect to hear again from the Merchants of Mars. Uncle Carl may no longer with us, but his torch has been picked up by various scientists, engineers, advocates and aficionados who are loud and proud in their belief that humankind's (or at least America's) next major space objective should be sending a manned expedition to Mars. Like, right now. Immediately. What are we waiting for? C'mon, let's go...!

As an SF author, I've established a modest reputation as a literary space advocate; most of my stories deal with near-future space colonization, and one of my novels is set on Mars. It may come as a surprise, therefore, when I say that this may be one of the worst ideas to come down the pike since New Coke, and for much the same reasons.

After falling out of vogue following the end of the Apollo era—at least in the planetary science community, but never in science fiction—the notion of sending men (and, yes, women) to Mars made a renaissance during the mid-eighties.

Much of this new interest can be credited to the "Mars Underground," a small group of space scientists who quietly brainstormed ways and means of getting to Mars during a series of conferences at the University of Colorado-Boulder. The group called itself an underground because, although some of its members worked for NASA, they were unable to affiliate themselves with the space agency when presenting papers at the Case for Mars conferences; NASA's official position at the time was that Mars was not an objective of the American manned space program, and these scientists didn't want to get themselves

in trouble with the Washington brass. So it was a conspiracy of sorts; space dreamers flying just beneath radar even as NASA was falling into the bureaucratic flat-spin that would culminate in the *Challenger* disaster.

But conspiracies seldom remain hidden for very long, and this one surfaced in the late eighties when the mainstream press began running stories on manned Mars missions; *Science Digest* published a cover article on Mars exploration in early 1986, *Apollo 11* astronaut Michael Collins wrote a piece on the same subject for *National Geographic* in late 1988, and on July 16, 1989, the Boston Sunday *Herald* ran a page-one feature under the headline "Next, Stop Mars?" By now, NASA had recovered from *Challenger*; the shuttle fleet was operational once more, the space station program had weathered several serious challenges from a deficit-minded Congress, and NASA's new Chief Administrator, former astronaut Richard Truly, was shaking out the old bedbugs. Several advisory panels had come to the conclusion that NASA needed a bold new vision which would give the agency something to do besides repairing satellites, and most agreed that Mars was a possible long-range goal.

The Bush Administration, probably feeling heat for not having enough of "the vision thing," took its cue from space advocates. On July 20, 1989, during a speech at the National Air and Space Museum commemorating the 20th anniversary of the *Apollo 11* landing, President Bush called for a manned expedition to Mars as America's next great space objective, following the construction of an international space station and the establishment of a permanent lunar base. Several months later, he reiterated the same declaration during a commencement speech at Texas A&M; this time, though, he stated that astronauts should be on Mars by 2020.

Bush was clearly attempting to emulate John F. Kennedy's famous Moon speech of 1963; it might have worked, too, if NASA hadn't delivered a \$400 billion price-tag. Granted, that figure was based on a post-Apollo scenario that the Case for Mars conferees had already dismissed as obsolete, and that the finding was supposed to spread

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over a thirty-year period, but those subtleties were neglected by an outraged Congress and a skeptical news media. Faced with an upcoming election in which the national deficit would be the foremost issue, the White House quietly backed away from its Space Exploration Initiative.

Yet the Mars Underground wasn't throwing in the towel just yet. In 1990, during the fourth Case for Mars Conference at the University of Colorado, a new plan for manned Mars exploration was publicly unveiled: Mars Direct.

Mars Direct is the brainchild of a tiger team led by two Lockheed Martin engineers, Robert Zubrin and David Baker. Developed in response to the old NASA baseline plan (which Zubrin, referring to the enormous nuclear spacecraft the agency proposed building in Earth orbit, describes as "*Battlestar Galactica*"), Mars Direct is elegant, stripped-down, and relatively low-cost. A spacecraft launched directly from Earth would transport to Mars an unmanned lander carrying a two-stage return rocket, a robotic surface rover, and an automatic chemical plant capable of processing oxygen, water, and fuel from the Martian atmosphere. Two years later, during the next available launch window, a second spacecraft would be launched from Earth, this one carrying a four-person crew within a module which would double as lander and habitation module; when the astronauts arrive at the touchdown site of the first rocket, they would find enough consumables for an extended surface mission and a fueled-up rocket ready to take them home.

I've grossly oversimplified Mars Direct—Robert Zubrin explains this proposal, both in print and on the lecture circuit, in much greater detail than I'm capable of doing here—yet it's probably the most feasible means of reaching Mars. It relies upon existing technology and "utilizes a live-off-the-land philosophy that makes maximum use of the Martian environment. Its initial sticker-price was \$100 billion, but Zubrin has since slashed the cost-estimate to around \$50 billion. Although NASA, following a long tradition of ignoring virtually every major proposal not made by Werner von Braun, at first rejected Mars Direct outright, NASA Chief Administrator Daniel Goldin has lately embraced the Lockheed Martin plan as the best means of getting to Mars.

Indeed, so has everyone else involved in the debate over long-term space objectives,

not the least of whom are the members of the Mars Now movement... my name, not their own, for what used to be a sea-level conspiracy. The essential argument now being made is that, since the United States doesn't make any major advances in space exploration without a clear objective, and because our present space program doesn't have the same level of public support that Project Apollo enjoyed during the 1960's, sending people to Mars should be the next major objective. They further charge that Mars is far more suitable for colonization than the Moon (which many Mars Now advocates perceive as a dead and high-useless wasteland) and claim that we already have the technological capability of reaching Mars within the A.D. 2020 deadline established by President Bush... even within ten years, if we got started now. Furthermore, it may not be necessary to ask American taxpayers (or rather, Congress and the White House, who occasionally act on their behalf) to foot the bill; it may be possible for private industry to accomplish this feat with little public assistance, save for seed-money and some perquisite technical support from NASA.

It's a wonderful vision. Multi-stage Mars rockets thundering away from Merritt Island; spacecraft setting sail to the red planet on a regular two-year schedule, each ship carrying not only the people and equipment necessary to establish one base on Mars, but also the machinery for subsequent expeditions; tiny settlements being scattered from the Tharsis region to the eastern edge of the Noctis Labyrinthis; multi-wheeled rovers rolling across rusty plains and frosty polar glaciers; vacuum-suited explorers repelling into vast chasms. Ultimately, the planet itself would be terraformed, and Mars would be transformed into a miniature version of Earth.

One strange rationale that I've heard expressed for an early-as-possible trip to Mars hinges on the prospect of an asteroid colliding with Earth; if this occurs before we have a Mars colony, that argument goes, then the entire human race will become extinct. So buy this space program, or we'll shoot your dog. And when NASA researchers from the Johnson Space Center announced last August that organic chemicals associated with extraterrestrial life might have been discovered within a meteorite found in Antarctica, and that ALH84001 may have originated on Mars, the Mars Now bunch trumpeted this as yet another reason why we need to send a manned expedition as soon as possible. Never mind the fact that the

conclusion reached by the JSC team was tentative at best, and has since been challenged by other planetary scientists; quick, we've got to get to Mars before all the other rocks run away!

Mars Direct is a great plan. So why am I so skeptical?

Maybe it's because I'm reminded of a scene in *The Space Merchants*, Frederik Pohl and C.M. Kornbluth's classic SF novel. In that story, a Madison Avenue advertising agency has been given the job of selling the public the idea of colonizing and ultimately terraforming Venus; a group of ad execs are shown a TV commercial intended to entice common folk (like the ones portrayed in the spot) into immigrating to Venus: "Over the breakfast juices and the children's pabulum... they spoke persuasively to each other about how wise and brave they had been to apply for passage in the Venus rocket. And the closing question of their youngest babblers ('Mommy, when I grow up kin I take my littul boys and girls to a place as nice as Venus?') cued to switch to a highly imaginative series of shots of Venus as it would be when the child grew up—verdant valleys, crystal lakes, brilliant mountain vistas.

"The commentary did not exactly deny, and neither did it dwell on, the decades of hydroponics and life in hermetically sealed cabins that the pioneers would have to endure while working on Venus's unbreathable atmosphere and waterless chemistry."

Now, flash forward 38 years; and check out the cover of the May 1991 issue of *Life*: a Hubble telescope photo of Mars beneath a banner headline: "Our Next Home."

Yes, this is a bit cynical, and perhaps I should be ashamed of myself. I don't believe Robert Zubrin, David Baker, or anyone else involved in the Mars Now movement has the slightest intent of chicanery. They're good men who have the best and noblest of intentions; if they're guilty of anything, it may be overzealousness. Yet sending men and women to Mars is not simply a hardware issue. In fact, it's not simple, period.

In terms of life sciences, we've barely scratched the surface. The long-term effects of microgravity are still being investigated, for one thing. Russian and American astronauts have lived on the Mir space station for about the same amount of time that a Mars flight would take, but most of them have come home barely able to walk, let alone do any serious backpacking, despite the hours of exercise they've done every day while in

Primary Ignition

space. Neither has anyone yet devised a dependable closed-loop life-support system for extended space missions; Mir has to have its oxygen and water supplies hauled up from Earth aboard NASA shuttles and Russian's unmanned *Progress* cargo rockets. The last great attempt to create a self-contained environment approximating the conditions of a Mars colony was Biosphere II, a dubious achievement at best.

Okay, let's say that we spend ten years investigating these issues aboard the international space station, once it's completed early in the next century, and that we devise ways of handling bone decalcification, heart enlargement, cosmic background radiation, and other messy biological details. Now we have to consider the problems of actually placing people on Mars. Yet we haven't landed anyone on another planetary surface since 1972; the Apollo astronauts are old and grizzled, and their experience is a quarter-century old. We know how to bring space shuttles safely through atmospheric entry, but Mars is not like Earth, not matter how much we might like to pretend otherwise; the Mars Direct lander doesn't have wings, and there's no paved landing strips or smooth lakebeds down there. And don't say we can practice this in virtual-reality simulators; would you trust your life to a pilot who's only prior rehearsal has been in a souped-up video game?

There's also our dear old friend, the Great Galactic Ghoul. That mofo hasn't gotten a taste for blood yet, but he may have cannibalistic tendencies. For better or worse, a manned Mars spacecraft of any sort is going to be a far more complex machine than an unmanned probe. It will have more built-in redundancy, but it will also have more pieces that can break. NASA has a hard enough time launching a trouble-free shuttle mission, and if sometimes goes seriously wrong, the crew has the option of aborting the mission; they can't do that when they're tens of millions of miles from home. *Apollo 13* was a close shave, and that near-disaster occurred only a quarter of a million miles from Earth.

Finally, we have to answer the question which has vexed every space dreamer since the end of the Apollo era: who's going to pay for the trip? This one flusters even the most rock-ribbed space advocates; when I posed it to another SF writer during a panel discussion on future lunar exploration, he angrily responded that great visions shouldn't be weighed in terms of money. Yes, well, that may be great rhetoric, but it doesn't answer

the question. Visions are cool, but the guys who will build the Mars Direct ships have bills to pay and families to feed. \$50 billion is a lot of dough, and pointing to the sky while quoting Konstantin Tsiolkovsky doesn't cut it.

Let's say we bypass the fickle whims of Congress and try to entice private industry into paying for a trip to Mars. I'm all in favor of private-side space exploration and firmly believe that this is the way to go, but I'm not so foolish to believe that even the largest multinational corporation will pony up \$50 billion for an endeavor with little short-term financial payoff. Commercial enterprise exists, first and foremost, for the sake of making money; if a company doesn't make money, then it goes broke and its employees lose their jobs. Therefore, successful companies take risks only when they foresee near-term returns on each dollar invested. At this point, a manned Mars mission simply doesn't offer that opportunity.

As a small investor, I recently purchased 100 shares in Apple Computer. That was a calculated risk based on personal interest; I own two Apples, so I like the company's product, and I'm betting that it will recover from its current problems and start earning profits again. However, if Steve Jobs were to announce tomorrow that Apple's next major initiative was to finance a Mars expedition, I'd call my broker in five seconds flat and tell him to dump my Apple stock. I'm a space buff, too, but damned if I'm going to lose money that way.

We'll see the first space billionaires within our lifetimes... indeed, long before most of us have to cash in our 401K retirement funds. But they won't make their fortunes from investing in Mars expeditions.

Space exploration is not about going to Mars. Space exploration is about permanently establishing humankind as a spacefaring race. That's the bottom-line fact which the Mars Now movement, in its laudable yet short-sighted enthusiasm, has either forgotten or is trying to ignore. If we go straight to Mars without first paying our dues, we run two major risks.

First, we run the risk of failure. Taking shortcuts around a learning curve can be very dangerous; like children who have just learned to walk, we're still toddling around the room, bumping into the furniture and occasionally scraping our knees. It's a bit too soon to be trying on jogging shoes and training for the Boston Marathon.

Second, we run the risk of success. Let's say we undertake a ten-or-twenty year crash program with the objective of placing the first expedition on Mars by 2010 or 2020. To accomplish this, we forgo extended space station research or returning to the Moon as unnecessary detours (why can't we do everything at once? See the money question above). Yes, we may succeed in getting to Mars, but only throwing all our eggs into this one glorious basket; our astronauts plant flags, collect samples, find some interesting microbes (dead or alive), and take a lot of nifty snapshots. Then they return home and everyone spends the next twenty-five years arguing about why we went to Mars.

If we're going to visit Mars, let's do so to establish a permanent presence. If it's just going to be another flags-and-footprints adventure, perhaps we should wait a little longer.

Mars isn't going anywhere. It's got a nice, stable orbit, and astronomers assure us that the planet isn't going to fall into the Sun any time real soon. We don't need to rush into this, so what's the hurry? Let's practice our chops first by establishing a major human presence in space. Building large stations in Earth orbit, colonizing the Moon, erecting solar power satellites, "sending expeditions to Earth-crossing asteroids... these are frontiers just as exciting as Mars, and have the potential of reaping long-term rewards which are just as great.

I think I read that somewhere. Maybe in a science fiction novel.

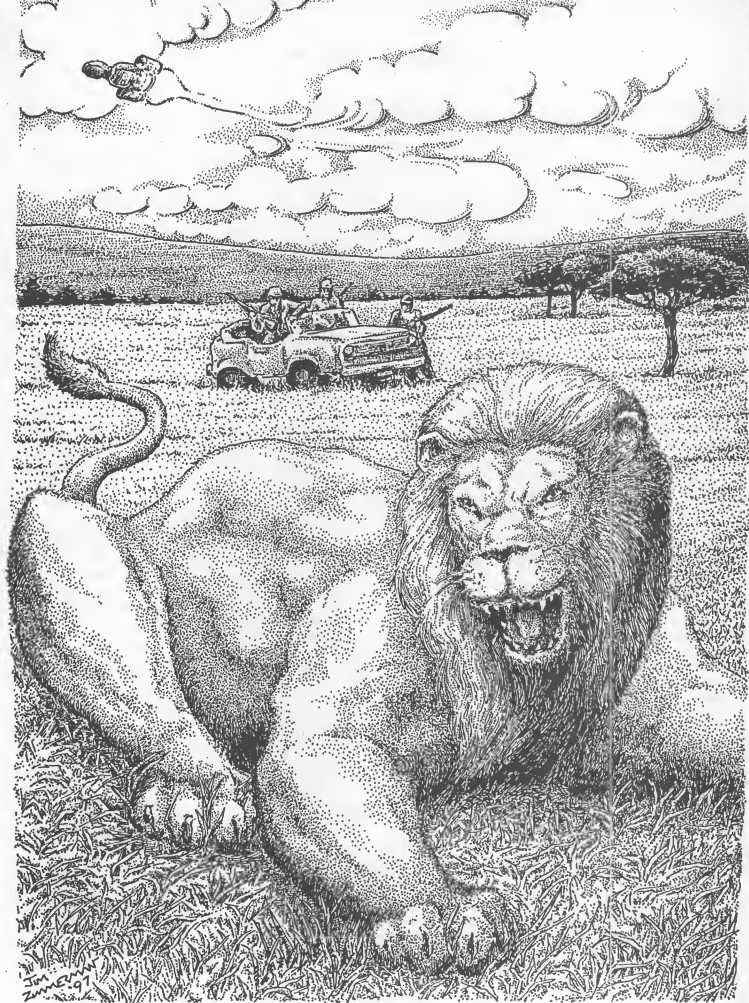
Recommended reading:

Robert A. Zubrin, *The Case for Mars* (The Free Press, 1996). The essential book on the Mars Direct plan.

Andrew Calkin, *A Man on the Moon* (Viking Press, 1994). The best history of the Apollo program yet published.

Frederick Pohl and C.M. Kornbluth, *The Space Merchants* (Ballantine/Del Rey, 1953) One of the great classics of science fiction.





Jim
Zimmerman
97

Animals Like Us

by Chris Bunch

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NOTE: I have donated all royalties in perpetuity from this short story to The Sea Shepherd Society, a cheerful bunch of eco-goons who've done delightful things around the world such as sinking pirate whalers in Lisbon Harbor, scuttling government-authorized whalers in Iceland, spray-painting harp seals to prevent their slaughter and other wonderful acts of terrorism. They're headed by Paul Watson, a Good Guy, an utterly committed radical, one of Greenpeace's founders, and an all-around beer soak who doesn't pay off his election bets. Contributions to the Sea Shepherd (they've now got their own submarine) may be made to: PO Box 628, Venice CA 90294

On a bright Antarctic spring morning the MV *Carl Akeley* sighted the last sperm whale, about 200 kilometers north-north-east of Adelaide Island. The ice was unusually light that year, so the *Akeley* was able to close on the land.

They had been tracking the beast, affectionately called "Moby," for more than 26 hours, and knew it would stay surfaced when it finally breached.

When the lookout shouted the sighting, it was nearly simultaneous with the ship's own radar seeing the plume, and the *Akeley* headed at its full speed of nearly 26 knots toward the whale.

The animal tried to zig away, but was too exhausted to evade.

The gun on the *Akeley's* prow had already been manned by Norwegian Rolf Nelsen, who proudly called himself the "Last of the Whale-Killers." Assisting him was Scripps Oceanographic Institute Biologist Joanne Hardin.

Nelsen's harpoon went true, and the whale rolled, sending bloody spray through its blowhole before sounding. But the line floats and fatigue kept it from going deep. Three quarters of an hour later the animal surfaced and was given the coup de grace.

The dissecting teams were standing by, and the carcass was dragged aboard through the *Akeley's* stern gates and gutted in preparation for preservation.

The hunt had been mounted after a massive fundraising effort by international wildlife groups, concerned that the people of tomorrow would never be able to see the most magnificent mammal of history.

It had originally been intended to build a special exhibit hall in New York City, near the museum ship *USS Intrepid*, but the cost of administering the fund consumed most of the building monies, which became a minor scandal.

A second attempt to raise funds failed, and so the whale, which had been maintained in a huge freezer formerly used to test Arctic clothing for soldiers, had to be disposed of.

Much of the meat was found to be out of prime, but enough was still edible for the wildlife groups to break even on their expenses, primarily through sales to the Japanese gourmet market, where whale was still remembered fondly.

The remainder was given to a dog food company in nearby Perth Amboy, New Jersey.

Captain Walcott Fredricks heard the howl of the fighter as it went overhead and reflexively looked up, shielding his eyes from the sun.

The F-43 Demon snarled past, clawing for altitude. Fredricks' fingers unconsciously came up and touched the wings on his dress blues.

*L*ucky, lucky bastard, he thought. *Nothing but sky, the bird and gee-forces.*

He felt fat, lazy, useless as he continued on, into the Pentagon's entrance. The only flying he got to do these days was to keep his flight pay coming in.

He went through the security check and boarded the internal shuttle automatically, as he'd done day after day for the last year and a half.

Tough. You want to be a fuckin' general, he thought. Maybe even first black Air Force Chief of JCS. Just like Colin flippin' Powell.

Is it worth it, Walcott? You could say screw a bunch of fast-tracking and get your ass back out with the troops, back in the cockpit where shit makes sense if you want.

He caught himself.

That wasn't the way to think. He'd need another year, maybe eighteen months as General Hazleton's aide, until he got his oak leaves. Then he could go back to a fighter squadron. He'd have five years, maybe more flying, then, before he had to go back to career-carving on somebody's staff.

He'd spent too much time getting his ducks in a row to give in to that old white-scarf, dogfight-at-dawn bullshit, he reminded himself. He'd already gotten an "attitude adjustment" talk from Hazleton about whether he was, quote, happy in his present duty station where others would be happy to serve, end quote, and had to do much smooching-of-the-buttocks to keep the old fart happy. He didn't have much slack—he'd heard stories that the only reason he worked for the General was that Hazleton had gotten flak about saying some Kluxer-type things at the O-Club, and had to do some serious Damage Control and pick a black for his aide.

He painted a cheery smile on his face and went into his office.

*T*he starship broke out of hyperspace just beyond Mars' orbit. It was glossy black and egg-shaped, with its base pointing forward.

It had one . . . and many . . . aboard.

Call the alien . . . aliens . . . the Swarm, although they were far more than just insects.

Originally they were the massed population of an entire world, half the galaxy distant. The population . . . less the dominant species.

Those "superior" beings had treated their world as if it were theirs to despoil, fouling the air, dirtying the half-gaseous seas, turning the many islands into desolate wastes.

Something had happened, something the Swarm could not name, but there came a time when all creatures thought as one. All creatures—except those who believed the world was their personal dominion.

Absolute Magnitude

They died. Some by their own pollution, most at the hands of the "lesser" beings of the planet. The last few killed themselves in terror, seeing every creature in existence, from the most invisible microbe to the great soaring creatures, combined against them.

As they died the Swarm grew stronger, more cohesive, more "intelligent" as it fed, although that is an imprecise word.

It learned to manipulate the machines and science of the vanished ones, including their first stumbling attempts to reach the stars.

Its polluted world was doomed, and so it abandoned it for space, seeking a new home.

It found one, learned it "liked" wandering and so, after pacifying that world, moved on.

Each time it conquered a world it grew stronger, more "intelligent," and other voices, other minds from these other worlds were absorbed into it.

It knew but one plan and had but one weapon.

It had used it 34 times before they reached Earth.

It had never failed.

The koala nibbled at a eucalyptus leaf, looked skeptically at the humans around its cage.

A makeup woman wandered over, peered over one of the lightmen's shoulder to see what the attraction was.

"Uh-oh," she said. "There goes the shoot."

The agency rep spun, glared at her.

"What's the matter?"

"Colette doesn't do animals," the first woman said. "Didn't you read her contract?"

The representative frowned.

"But this is just a koala. And we've got its wrangler right here. There'll be no problem."

The door to one of the trailers opened, and Colette Edward stepped out. In spite of the chill wind coming off the Atlantic, she wore jodhpurs, a thin silk blouse, and a scarf over her head, since the photo session was supposed to show Bondi Beach in the summer. An Army field jacket was pulled over her shoulders.

She walked past the cameras to the truck the koala's cage sat in, saw the small friendly-looking mammal and stopped cold.

"What's this, Ms. McKenzie?"

The agency representative smiled tentatively.

"We... that is, the man from the airline and I, and the sales rep... had a conference yesterday evening, and I had this marvelous idea," she said quickly, seeing Colette's frown. "Thirty or forty years ago, the airline used a koala as its emblem, and we thought it would be just marvelous, sort of a touch of the past, to revive the idea."

"Everyone really respects the past, especially Australians, and if we remind them that the airline's been around for almost three-quarters of a century, that'd be a real plus."

"Didn't you read my contract? No animals. Period."

"I... I didn't really have time. I flew in from the Coast last week, and I've been busy planning the shooting schedule, and this particular image just flashed in front of me last—"

"The session's canceled," Colette said flatly. "Pack my things, and send them back to my agency. I'll expect the penalty check within the week."

"But..."

But Colette Edward wasn't listening. She hurried back to her trailer, came out with a small purse, and went to her Daimler.

The car hummed into life, reversed away from the knot of vehicles, and gunned back down the twisting dirt road to the highway, away from the beach.

"But... but what..." the ad agency woman seemed about ready to cry.

"Like I said," the makeup woman said. "Colette doesn't do animals. Not ever."

Animals had always hated Colette Edward, or so she thought. She had no idea why, but from her earliest childhood, every time she'd tried to make friends with someone's pet she'd either been hissed, pecked, or snapped at.

When she was twelve her great aunt's cockapoo had snapped at her face, ripping a two-inch tear in the corner of her mouth. Plastic surgery had cradicated the wound, although Colette thought she could still see it, if she held her head a certain way.

She specified in her contracts that she preferred to be shot from the front or left side, whenever possible, and of course would never do a shoot with any animal whatsoever.

Those who hired her generally honored that request, because Colette was one of the dozen most highly-paid models in New York. The soon-to-be-unemployed Ms. McKenzie, a new vice president from the Los Angeles branch, hadn't thought she needed to worry about the vagaries of the east.

One reason Colette was so popular with photographers, ad agencies, and corporations was that she had little of the nervous narcissism too many others in her profession cultivated. With the exception of her avoidance of animals, she was as

perfectly normal as any other young Texan who'd come to New York for a career.

She thought she knew why she was where she was—there were many women as beautiful as she was. But not many worked as hard.

She'd been shy, insecure growing up, and the dog's attack had made her even more vulnerable. She'd driven herself hard in high school, intending to find a career in law or medicine, some profession where she would be guaranteed respect.

Instead, when she was seventeen, and on a blind date to Dallas, she was spotted by one of Eileen Ford's scouts.

Six months later, the high-checkboned, seductive face, framed by frothing black hair, was on the cover of *Vogue* for the first time.

In the five years since then, the tall, leggy woman had forgotten how many other times she'd appeared there, nor did she remember the names of all of the other magazines, catalogues, vids and appearances she'd made.

She felt time was always running at her back, and sooner or later the magic would vanish and she'd be recognized as just another mildly pretty face.

When it did... she would be, *must* be rich and beyond caring.

She pretended it didn't matter that she had almost no private life. There'd been a few men, but they seemed more interested in her as an accessory to their success than anything else.



Animals Like Us

She could worry about her personal life when the carousel slowed down.

"Darling, come quick."

"What is it?"

"A meteor, I think. It looks like it came down just on the other side of that ridge."

The man hurried across the clearing. "Nothing to see now," he said, in considerable disappointment. "Hope it doesn't start a fire."

He put an arm around her, and they walked back to their tent, where a fire guttered down.

"What were you doing?" the woman asked.

"Acting like a kid," he said sheepishly. "Cutting our initials in that tree there. I think it's some kinda pine or cedar or something."

"I don't think that's kid stuff," the woman said fondly. "I think it's romantic."

She kissed him.

The Swarm's ship braked just clear of the ground and hovered. Multiple eyes and other sensing organs consulted screens. The archaic scene was perfect.

The Colorado forest had been clearcut, then burned-over years before. Secondary growth made it difficult to move through, and obscured the yawning mouth of the deep cave.

Weapon-snouts emerged from ports, and violet light flared. The light struck rock, and it melted and flowed away.

The ship waited while the rock cooled, then floated inside.

The Swarm decided it would mount the operation from directly on the planet's surface. Its feelings could not be called emotions, but it felt something akin to "boredom" or "discomfort," and wished to be outside the confines of the starship.

The atmosphere of Earth was poisonous to The Swarm, but that hardly mattered, since it had no intention of remaining on Earth once its task was complete and it had "fed."

A secondary chamber was carved out, close to the outside of the rock. Three observation windows were cut to the outside.

It selected a huge spacesuit that had originally been used by the now-extinct primal species of a planet visited and conquered two Earth-centuries earlier. The suit had four legs and a dozen outlets for manipulating tentacles.

The Swarm modified its form to fit the suit, connected the fat life-support tube to the ship, and began carrying the necessary equipment into the lock.

Four days later, it was ready.

Carl Appel and Bob Wirkkala slumped in the door of the café, propped their shotguns against the wall, and stripped off their dripping slickers.

"You two look like you need some coffee," the waitress said.

"Coffee's the strongest you pour, so it'll have to do," the first man said morosely.

"Boy, it don't get no colder than today," the other said. "Weather goes straight to the bone when you're skunked."

"Nothing at all?" the waitress asked as she poured. "I've never known you two not to come back with something, generally the limit."

"Guess there's a first time for everything," the first man said.

"Nary a bird today. Hell, I didn't even shoot but twice."

"What's wrong? Aren't the ducks out there this year?"

"Oh, they're out there, all right. But . . . but it's like they're ahead of us. We sat in the boat, decoys out all right 'n' proper, and here came a big flock of mallards. Carl started callin' them, and they were comin' back at him. They started droppin' down toward us, and no more 'n' 500 feet above us it was like they saw us, took fright, and dove back out toward the bay. Isn't that right, Carl?"

The other man nodded. "Wasn't worth even popping a cap for on the off chance."

"Now ain't that the damndest thing?" the first man asked. "And doesn't it make it worse if I told you that we had five flocks do exactly the same thing this morning? Hell, I feel like I'm some idiot from the city, out there in plain sight dancin' around to the radio or something." He tried a smile, and it vanished.

Joyce was also unsmiling. "Bob, I believe you. You know why? You're the third hunter that's told me that today. Sam Rafael had the same thing happen, and the Boyce Brothers, and a couple of folks from Baltimore that had Elbert guidin' them."

The three looked at each other.

"Be pure hell if those damned ducks are getting smarter 'n we are," Bob said.

Carl nodded somberly.

"Even considering how little smarts it takes to be brighter 'n somebody who wants to sit with his butt in ice water all day on the off chance of shootin' something that tastes fishy and he's probably's going to bust a tooth on from his own shot anyway . . . that is pretty scary."

Contrary to reports, the barge captain was not drunk. In fact, he hadn't had a drink in at least ten years. When the cross-current struck he was away from the craft's tiny bridge, arguing with his Algerian wife about the latest bombing in Marseilles, and whether it was dissidents, the Corsican Mafia or (his personal favorite) the never-to-be-sufficiently-feared royalists.

The current smashed his unwieldy craft into the eastern tip of the Ile de la Cité, very close to the Mémorial de la Déportation, the monument to the French Jews sent to the German death camps during the Second World War. Ironically, the captain himself was Jewish.

The crash sent most of the barge's illegal deck cargo, some 25 rusting barrels full of untreated sewage, into the Seine. No one ever discovered where the cargo had come from, and the captain refused to make any statements.

The Seine was closed for all fishing or swimming due to fecal coliform contamination.

Four days later, the Minister of Tourism was forced to resign for having dared release news of the spill at the height of the tourist season.

From the New York Daily Times/News:

Brazil Creates National Park From Its Last Rain Forest

BRASILIA—Brazilian President Joao Rivera announced today that the 1,000 square miles remaining of the country's once-great rain forests would be set aside as a natural preserve.

"This is necessary," he said, "so we never forget what made our country great, and will serve to inspire us into the future. It was necessary for us to cut the forests so Brazil could achieve its full greatness, now it is time for another way of thinking."

Absolute Magnitude

Brazil's economy has been in shambles for a quarter of this century, its government overthrown a dozen times by the military or the out-of-office opposition. A Brazilian's life expectancy is currently 34 years, slightly lower for men than women, and the leading cause of death is pulmonary disorders or cancer brought on by the huge factories the country attracted in the last years of the 20th Century . . .

Collette Edward had a winter house in Martinique, a flat overlooking Central Park, townhouses in Paris and Copenhagen.

She was in Denmark when the first dream came.

She woke, not quite remembering it, but knowing it was important.

She reached for the note pad that always was on the night stand, touched the light on her pen, and began scrawling:

Something strange . . . in the Rockies . . . something that hates us . . . hates me . . . a puppetmaster . . . for animals . . . it's alien . . . it doesn't belong to Earth . . .

The net wound slowly in across the gillnetter's bowpicker. Tom Uramaka watched the nylon spool in grimly. He'd taken only a handful of salmon that day. And this was the worst season he'd ever seen.

Goddamn white man, he thought. Take our land, turn it into shit, then do the same thing with the ocean. Pretty soon, no life in the sea, no life in the air, no life on the land, and somehow they'll find a way to blame it on us Indians.

It was hardly worth going back in while the fish holds of the Peggy-Sue were empty, even if the Tribal Council had finally negotiated what everyone agreed was a fair price from the white eyes at the cannery.

He took his eyes off the net, looked off to seaward just as a pointed, friendly face broke through the rolling swells.

"Fucking seal," he shouted, "and you'll try to steal the little I got, won't you? At least you I can take care off!"

He declutched the net reel, ran from the bow station to the wheelhouse, grabbed the .30-06 hung in a clip above the radar, and jacked a round into the chamber as he went back outside.

There was no sign of the seal.

He went to the ship's side, rifle at his shoulder, looking for the creature. There was nothing.

He heard the animal bark from somewhere forward, and he dashed to the bows. It sounded like the damned thing was between the half-gathered net and the boat itself.

He craned over the port bow, rifle in one hand, awkward in his oilskins.

The orca surfaced just under the starboard side of the boat, coming up hard, thudding into the aluminum hull, and the Peggy-Sue rolled wildly.

Uramaka flailed at empty air, tried to grab the boat's rail, missed and tumbled into the chill Pacific water.

He sank down and down, pulled under by his boots and clothing. *Don't panic, Tommy. You've been in worse.*

Lungs searing, he managed to kick off the boots, and floundered his way back to the surface.

He gasped in air, while his hands tore at the velcro of the oilskins, ripping the jacket open, shedding it.

The Peggy-Sue was a dozen yards away, rolling in the swell. He could hear its engine idling.

He started swimming toward it.

He heard the seal bark again, three times in quick succession.

Uramaka was only a few strokes from safety when the dorsal fin of the great white shark broke water.

The six Blue Angels swept down from 20,000 feet. Their wingtips almost touched as they fell toward the earth racing up toward them.

Ten thousand watching people held their breath as the planes dove closer and closer to the ground, smoke pouring from the generators on their tails.

They leveled out 50 feet above the concrete, and the crowd cheered wildly as the planes rolled inverted.

At the end of the runway they would climb again, breaking into a sunburst formation.

A flight of sixty geese rose from the marshlands at the end of the strip, and flew directly into the path of the onrushing jets, into their engine intakes.

Three F37's smashed into the ground, the shock waves sending a fourth cartwheeling down.

A fifth pulled into a climb, and its engine exploded.

The last Angel managed to avoid the boiling cloud of debris, rolled and tried to climb out.

The engines lost power, and the jet flamed out, toppling backward, back toward the crowd.

The pilot tried to bank away, but there was no time, and the last Blue Angel smashed into the crowd at more than 400 miles an hour.

When the screams started again, they were no longer in mock-horror.

There were five men on the forest track. They still wore the camouflage uniforms they'd been issued when they'd been taken from their tiny village and informed they had volunteered for the Army of Liberation. There had been seven of them, then. One had stepped on a land mine within a week.

When the six survivors deserted after a year they took weapons with them—three light machine guns and three archaic but still deadly rocket-launchers, and two racks of the rocket-grenades.

They knew better than to return to their village, where the "army's" provosts would go looking. They thought of becoming bandits, like so many of their fellows, but they'd been part of too many firing squads to consider that for long.

Instead, they crossed the border into Kenya and found an abandoned hamlet for a base.

They'd been better-armed than the government wardens they occasionally encountered, and so the Kenyan officials ignored them.

After six months and three successful trips from the Park to the coast with their ivory, they were rich enough to pay the wardens to look the other way or, even better, to guide them to their prey. They bought ammunition and more rocket-grenades from a local army post.

Their gold also made them welcome at an inhabited village, and bought them women and whiskey, although they truthfully preferred the maize beer they'd grown up with. But rich men drank whiskey.

One had been mauled by a leopard, and died of blood poisoning, since they dared not go to Nyeri for a doctor.

Two of them had purchased wives, and a third was thinking about it. Life was very good, even though it was harder and harder to find elephants.

Animals Like Us



But one of their friends in the government had told them of a secretive herd that lived high in the Aberdares, far from the squatters around the Park's fringes. The herd even used the desolate Moorlands to cross the mountains, always avoiding Man and any of the tracks he used.

The five determined they would take this herd down. Their tactics would be simple, the same ones they'd used before. They would find the herd, and use the RPGs to drop as many elephants as they could, while the machine gunners sprayed the herd, then finished off any left alive. They'd cut the tusks out, and hire bearers to carry the ivory, the hides and the tails to where the Chinaman always waited with his ship, at a secret landing place not far from the new port of Kimathi. The bearers would be permitted to take all the meat they could carry to their always-hungry families for their wages.

The team's leader shivered, and pulled his ragged jacket closer. It was cold this high in the mountains, and the sun had not yet broken through the mist to provide some warmth. But he thought of a Kikuyu phrase he'd learned—*Murunguru utahaga na imi*—The bushcat skips in the dew, and grinned. The early one can choose the best game. Besides, the mist would help hide them as they moved slowly, carefully, through the thick trees.

There was a thick pile of droppings ahead. He saw the steam rising, and knew the herd was very close.

He pointed down, needlessly. The others, his team brothers, had already seen.

The leader removed the noscap from his grenade, and pulled the safety pin free.

Holding the weapon ready, he crept onward, moving as he'd learned, slowly, toe touching down, then heel, then the next foot coming down...

There was a huge prayer tree ahead. He moved around the mugumo tree, eyes moving back and forth.

The first elephant came out of the mist silently, trunk coiled. The man whirled as the animal's trunk snapped out, smashing his skull like a melon.

The second man pulled the trigger on his machine-gun, chattering a useless burst into the mucky ground as the elephant brought his great leg up, and crashed it down on his chest.

Two other elephants came from nowhere.

Someone fired a grenade, and the rocket arced high into the misty air, then fell somewhere, its explosion a dull thud.

There was only one poacher left, and his weapon lay yards away, forgotten. He backed away, holding up his hands as if to push the beast away, and came hard against the trunk of the prayer tree.

A smaller elephant, little more than a calf, came toward him.

The smell of musk washed over the man.

The small elephant's trunk curled around the man's waist and lifted him overhead, as he screamed.

The elephant bashed the man again and again against the tree trunk until he was unrecognizable.

Then the elephant bellowed shrill triumph, a cry echoed by the rest of the herd.

The greatest elephant surveyed the five men, and saw no movement. He turned away, then stopped. He and the others remained motionless, as if listening to inaudible instructions.

The largest went to each weapon and put a heavy foreleg on it, crushing them into scrap.

Then he and the herd went swiftly into the gray mist.

The large orange cat yawned, stretched, and jumped into the store window. It considered, then selected a polyester copy of a Bokhara rug for the rest of the night.

It licked its foreleg, paying no attention to the handful of people outside, crouched around a burning trashcan. They were hardly a new sight on this, or any other Los Angeles street, and the animal knew the men couldn't get through the thick bars and the bulletproof glass.

It curled up, and its eyes blinked closed.

A noise came from the back of the store and the cat jumped up, back arching.

Plywood paneling tore, and a rat almost the size of the cat pushed its way into the store.

The cat's mouth drew into a snarl. It leapt down, onto the carpet store's floor, and advanced on its ancient enemy.

It stopped suddenly. Its head moved back and forth, as if listening to an unseen speaker.

The rat remained motionless.

The cat began purring.

It leapt back up into the window, became a ball and, still purring, went to sleep, tail over its nose.

Another rat entered the store, then four others. Each saw the sleeping cat, and knew there was no threat.

The rats went to piles of carpeting, and began rolling on them, as if imitating the habits of the sleeping animal in the window.

Each time, hundreds of tiny flea eggs were left to sift down into the nap of the carpets.

The insects-to-be carried pneumonic plague bacilli.

Absolute Magnitude

After contaminating all of the carpeting they could reach, the rats crept out the way they'd entered. None paused at the paper bag that held the forgotten lunch of one of the store's workers.

There were other stores to visit that night.
The cat slept on, dreaming its own dreams.

The phone buzzed, and Walcott Fredericks picked it up.
"General Hazleton's office. This is Captain Fredericks."
"Walcott, this is Devon."

It was his backscatter, from his old squadron.
"Hey, tiger. What makes a lowlife GIB come sucking around the seat of power? They finally catch you at something?"

"Not fun today, Walcott. Got some bad news. Colonel Thurston got killed yesterday."

"Shit!" Thurston had been Fredericks'—and Devon's—first squadron commander, and had done a lot to convince them there was a career for blacks in the Air Force.

"What happened," Fredericks said. "Was he stunting around again?" The Colonel was famous for knowing the exact envelope of every plane he was qualified to fly—and for always pushing things one notch beyond.

"Nope. Real strange. A goddamned deer killed him. In his own goddamned back yard."

"What?"

"Yeah. I guess he surprised it in his garden, and the critter panicked. Put a hoof right through his skull, then trampled him pretty good."

"I'll be go to," Fredericks said. "I never thought he'd eat it on the ground."

"Neither did anybody else. Hell of a stupid way to die."

"I can't think of any sensible ones."

"Guess you're right. You gonna be able to get out for the funeral?"

"I'll try. But I don't think the General will cut me free."

"We'd appreciate seeing you."

"I'll give it my best shot."

"I know you will," Devon said. "Oh yeah. One other thing. I guess they call this irony. Thurston was getting ready for the first day of deer season. He and the XO had a bet going and were making bad jokes about who'd be the first to ice Bambi."

"... this is Alton de Rosa, CNN News, Beijing. The government today issued a preliminary estimate of the plague deaths for the last week. Almost a million people have died, but even this appalling figure is privately disputed by sources inside the government, pointing out that last month's plague in Los Angeles killed almost 75,000 before it was brought under control, and that was with the full efforts of a highly-technological society."



"Here in China, where doctors are still rare in many rural provinces, it's possible that the death toll may be even greater, as much as ..."

Colette Edward dreamed of the alien puppetmaster three times or more a week, and now dreaded sleep. Sooner or later someone would see the lines on her face, and the whispers would begin that she was past it, and the editor's would start looking at other models' portfolios.

That was one fear, but worse was of that cave, somewhere in Colorado.

So far, her dream had kept her outside, not letting her enter and see the horror she knew was within.

So far ...

Colette wondered if she should see a psychiatrist, but thought wryly she'd have to be nuts to do something like that.

But she had to do something.

The bull sunfished, and the rider lost his grip on the circingle and flew through the air, sprawling down in the hoof-pocked dirt of the corral.

The bull snorted, turned back to finish the rider. The clown came waddling in, and the bull turned, saw him, and charged.

The clown zigged, darted away, and ducked into the barrel.

The bull hesitated, looked around.

Then he charged the barrel, sending it rolling away. Again, again, he smashed at it, while the crowd in the stands screamed.

The barrel came apart, and the clown tried to run for the corral fence.

He almost made it. The bull caught him, sent him spinning through the air to lie motionless.

Two riders broke out of the chute, shaking their ropes loose. Then their horses seemed to go mad, bucking, spinning, trying to crush their riders against the far corral railing.

The bull paid no mind, but charged the gates. He struck once, twice, and the hinges ripped away as the panicked audience emptied the stands.

The bull cantered out, into the concession area.

Two children saw him, shrieked, and ran.

The bull snorted, lowered his horns, trotted forward.

His trot became a full charge ...

The keeper opened the cage, and the pack of corgis yapped out, and ran toward the slender dark-haired woman that was their master. One of the last of the dogs snapped at the ankles of the detective beside the keeper.

"Bloody nasty little bastards," he said.

"Aye," the keeper agreed. "But it's tradition, no? Ever since Queen Liz the Second."

The Scotland Yard man watched the Queen walk into the Balmoral woods, the corgis bounding around her, then turned back, and lowered his voice.

"Sometimes I think Her Royal Highness thinks she's just as high-class."

"Tell you, Sergeant Withers," the keeper confided. "In 'gran' worked for th' House of Windsor, back in th' last century, an' the tales he told m' da would make you blink."

"This 'un ain't much different than Lizzie an' her sexhappy whorin' brood, in fact."

Animals Like Us

The detective grunted.

"Now we just bleedin' wait while she sports about. And I went and volunteered for C11."

"Look on th' bright side. Y' could be in Glasgow now, pourdin' th' bricks," the keeper said. "They've got plague there, aye?"

The copper nodded. The two men waited in silence. Finally the security man looked at his watch.

"Christ, is she getting naked with those beasts? Never known her to take this long. She's got some goddamned Committee waiting on her already."

"She'll rip y'r face off," the keeper warned, "if y' try to chide her. Th' time with the dogs, she told me, is fair precious."

"I'll just walk into the copse. Let her see me, and maybe that'll remind her."

The keeper shrugged. The detective followed the path that wound into the glen.

He came into the open, and froze in horror.

The Queen of England lay sprawled on her back, not moving.

Her dogs snarled around her. Their jaws dripped gore.

Her throat had been ripped open before she had time to scream, and most of her face was already eaten away.

One dog saw the policeman, yapped a warning. The pack turned as one, and ran toward the River Dee and was gone before the policeman remembered his pistol.

Cameras hummed into life as the Chief of Naval Operations, flanked by two aides, walked up to the podium of the briefing room. There was a clamor of questions, which the Admiral ignored.

"I will read a brief release," he announced. "This is all the information available at the present time. I will not take any questions afterward."

"The Department of the Navy regrets that the nuclear intelligence-gathering submarine *Rickover* appears to have met with some catastrophe within the last 48 hours."

"The submarine was last in communication at 0745 Zulu Time yesterday with ComPac headquarters by Super Low Frequency satellite communications."

"The submarine was then operating in relatively shallow waters off the coast of China, and reported no unusual occurrences."

"Search efforts are continuing, both by the United States Seventh Fleet, the People's Republic of China, and the Indonesian Navy."

"We have set up an Irident Center, which will be manned 24 hours a day. All information will be made available as rapidly as possible, within the limitations of national security."

"Most of the families of the sailors aboard the *Rickover* have been notified, and are in seclusion, being consoled by Naval authorities."

"When more information is available, you will be notified by one of the Information Officers."

"That is all."

The commodities market went berserk that year as hordes of locusts ravaged the Midwest and the plains of Russia, moving in even sweeps through the ripening crops.

None of the traders seemed to realize that famine was now of more concern than corn futures.

The cattle holding pens stretched for miles along Interstate Highway 5. Now they could barely be seen through the boil of dust rising around them.

The tallyman, perched atop a pen's crossbar, spat down at a steer bellowing up at him.

"Don't do that," the accountant begged.

"Why not? Don't figger the bassids'll get any madder."

The steer slammed twice into the upright. It swayed, but held firm. The animal lost interest, joined the others as they streamed away from the pens.

"What happened to Mister Kincaid?"

"I saw him go down," the tallyman said. "Got trampled by about six critters, so I don't guess we should worry about him, anymore."

"What happened? How'd they all get out?"

The ex-cowboy's face turned grim.

"All I figger is some fuckin' 'eco-nut got in, opened all the pens."

"But . . . there's 130 or more pens. It would've taken more'n one man."

"Group of 'em, then. Prob'ly a buncha fruits snuck down from Frisco."

"In broad daylight? I was outside all morning," the accountant protested. "Somebody would've seen something, wouldn't they?"

"You got a better story?" the tallyman demanded. "Whaddaya you figger? These goddamn cows went and opened the pens by themselves?"

The accountant didn't answer.

"What happens next?" he said, after a time.

"I guess sooner or later one of them goddamned tourists up on the road'll figger something's weird, and call the cops. Sooner or later, they'll fish us outa here. Mebbe need a helicopter."

"No. I meant with all the cattle."

"They'll just mill around, and eventually start wanderin' back into their pens. But it'll be a pretty mess—"

"No! Look," the accountant interrupted, pointing.

The tallyman looked toward the far side of the pens.

"Well I'll be dipped," he said softly.

The cattle were forming up, just as if there were invisible herders directing them, and slowly streaming away, to the south and west.

Toward the rich agricultural fields of the San Joaquin Valley.

The Swarm experienced content. The plan, as expected, was proceeding normally. In fact, it was going a bit better than anticipated, since there appeared to be not the slightest sign the primary species of this planet had yet realized the obvious.

Once this stage was complete, The Swarm could proceed with the final phase, the assimilation of the rest of Earth's creatures.

Then, fed, it could continue, seeking another planet, leaving a sterile green Eden that would slowly strangle and die without animal life to produce carbon dioxide or pollinate the plants.

Gentlemen, please be seated," Admiral William Ransom, Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, announced.

The room was a plush conference center, deep in the Pentagon's innermost ring.

Captain Fredericks, sitting beside his boss, General Hazleton, looked around the room. There were two Air Force generals, two other admirals, one Marine brigadier general, three Army two-star generals, a Coast Guard Commander plus their aides.

Something was very definitely in the wind.

"I'll begin this by saying that I have not gone mad," Admiral Ransom announced. "Some of the things I shall be saying may sound that way.

"They are not to go beyond this room. All of you present have very high security clearances, and are ordered to communicate the data I am about to share with no one unless directly authorized by my office.

"I'll add that if anyone leaks to the goddamned press I'll personally hunt them down and have their guts for a winding sheet, if I need to be more specific."

There was a ripple of mild amusement. Admiral Ransom may have been known outside the services as the Silver Fox or for being the randiest American leader since Henry Kissinger, but inside them he was known as "No Prisoners, No" Ransom.

"I assume all of you are concerned by what's been going on in the world over the last year or so. It almost feels to me like we're being visited with all of the troubles that Moses put on the Egyptians, and a couple more new ones.

"Fires . . . I can't think of a city in America or Europe that hasn't had a plague of fires. How many of them have had martial law declared? Thirty? Forty? I've lost count. Both the National Guard and Reserve have been activated for months now.

"Disease . . . you all know that the Center for Disease Control has, by presidential order, been permitted to draft physicians and nurses, and we still have plagues ravaging our country.

"Within the services we've had major losses in all our supply depots from rats.

"The Navy has had trouble with unexplained fires aboard several ships, including two of our newest carriers, that appear to be arson. But we've been unable to find any human involvement.

"I'll also remind you of the shocking catastrophe of the Navy's Blue Angels some time ago, and I'm sure you're all well aware of the significant number of aircraft in all services that have been lost from bird strikes.

"In fact, there are more than 1,000 times the number as three years ago.

"Now is when I shall begin to sound mad.

"Several weeks ago, we found the wreckage of the *Rickover*." There were gasps. Ransom nodded.

"We haven't released the information yet, although the families have been notified.

"The reason is that the *Rickover* was not sunk by accident. It was rammed."

"By who?" came a voice. "Who blindsided us?"

"Not who. What. The stern of the sub had been caved in, permitting a tear in the pressure hull. The sub was at an estimated depth of 650 feet at the time, so destruction was sudden and complete.

"The surveying team, aboard a DSV, made full holographic tapes of the wreckage. Then torches were lowered and the impact area was cut free, raised and analyzed.

"When the *Rickover* was struck, the attacker was torn badly. There were still shreds of animal tissue found where the sub's jagged metal had cut into the rammer."

"An animal? What the hell kind of animal could take out a sub?"

"Our analysis shows the tissue to come from that of a whale. Specifically, almost certainly a sperm whale."

"But they're fuckin' extinct!"

"General, your language. Evidently there's at least one left . . . or there was, anyway."

"A whale can't sink a submarine," General Hazleton said. "Can it?"

"It can, and did. I'll remind you of a real-life sinking," Ransom said. "In the 1800's, the whaler *Essex* was destroyed by a sperm whale it was hunting."

Fredericks nodded, remembering. He'd done a paper on the sources of Melville's *Moby Dick* at the Academy.

"This was not a surprise to my analysts here in the Pentagon," Ransom went on. "Animals had already been suggested as a possible cause of our problems. Various scenarios were laid out with this as the primary factor, and in each and every one of these cases all unknowns were satisfied.

"Gentlemen, it appears that 100% of our problems, both for the services and for society as a whole, can be explained if you accept animals as the causative factor."

"But . . . what does it mean?" one of the Army officers stammered. "It means that we are setting up a special study group, to report directly to me and to the president, trying to find out why this strange behavior is occurring.

"It will be titled Project Lodestone. All of you in this room have been selected for the team. Of course, we'll be adding a full staff of investigators from all services, plus any other personnel we need.

"I'll remind you of another project, many years ago, to study equally unusual phenomena. That was Project Bluebook, back in the 1950's, formed to investigate that nonsense called UFO's. When word of its existence leaked, it became a major embarrassment.

"Stand warned this shall not be allowed to happen with Project Lodestone.

"My aides will brief you further. I am late at the White House. In case you haven't heard, about an hour ago the President's face was quite badly gashed by his parrot."

Walcott turned and looked at General Hazleton. "Oh brother," the general said softly. "I wonder who we pissed off?"

"A better question, sir. How long do you think it'll be before this leaks to every tabloid in the world?"

"Captain, you're too damned cynical. And smart. I give it . . . twenty minutes. And I think I'm being an optimist."

Headline and deck, *Washington Post*:

President Creates Task Force Against Chaos JCS Chairman Named As Head

Colette Edward yawned, yawned again, fighting sleep, dreading the dream that grew more real every day.

She got up from the couch, and started walking back and forth, back and forth, looking down at the darkness of Central Park.

Here and there fires flickered, the campfires of the people who'd been burnt out of their homes and now lived in the Park, since all of New York's shelters were overflowing or also destroyed. The small fires echoed the larger ones that still burnt out of control in Manhattan.

But the fires no longer had any power to terrify her.

She sat down, picked up the newspaper, scanned it again.

Sleep crawled up on her, and once more she fought it off.

"All right. So I'm loony-tunes," she said, and keyed the phone.

The synth voice said "Talk to me, darling."

"Major Desmond Ryan. Home. It's under Des."

"Dialing . . ."

Animals Like Us

The orangutan whimpered in fear, but crept closer to the long, low building. Its imperative was stronger than instinct.

It carried a long crowbar it'd picked up in the maintenance shed after breaking out of its cage.

Now it clumsily inserted the tip of the bar into the doorjamb, and pried. Metal-sheathed wood bent, snapped, and the door came open.

The orangutan went inside, and there came the sound of glass smashing.

The sign on the building read:

Bronx Zoo Herpetological Collection

The ape came out, and ran toward the tigers' cages.

After a time, snakes began slithering out of the door, moving purposefully toward the zoo's exits into the city streets.

“You see the pictures of the Berlin Fire, sir?” First Sergeant Cates asked Walcott. “Sufferin’ Jesus, but it looked like flicks I’ve seen of the bombing back in the Second World War.”

Fredericks nodded.

“And did you see this?” The ex-Delta Team operative handed the Air Force officer a piece of paper, with several degrees of classification stamped or it.

Walcott scanned the paper.

Briefly it said that all contact with the US Embassy in Moscow had been lost, and as of an hour earlier, communications hadn’t been restored. “Samo-samo Cairo, Joburg, Prague,” Cates said.

“Wonderful,” Fredericks said. “You got any other bits of joy, Top?”

“Yeah. I got a call from my wife. She’s with the family, and they ain’t lettin’ anything close to the farm that’s on more’n two legs. Kids didn’t like having to put the cat to sleep . . . but . . .” the noncom shrugged. “What about your family?”

“I don’t have one. Folks died years ago. Never got married.”

“The way things are going,” the Special Forces soldier said, “maybe that’ll be a blessing.”

Fredericks was about to answer when the door came open, and Cates shot to his feet.

“Ten-HUT!”

Walcott snapped up. It was Admiral Ransom.

“Uh . . . Captain Fredericks? A word with you? In private.”

“I’ll be making some more coffee,” Cates said. “Let me know if you need more.” He went out.

“Yessir?”

“General Hazleton told me you’re a man of considerable subtlety, who can be trusted to keep his mouth shut.”

“I hope so, sir.”

The Admiral handed Fredericks a copy of *Harper’s Bazaar* magazine. Walcott looked with casual interest at the blackhaired woman on the cover. Fredericks thought of making some crack about he didn’t know that magazine was on the Chairman’s required reading list, but thought better of it. The *Chairman* made jokes. Captains just laughed their butts off. He waited.

“The model is Colette Edward,” Ransom said.

“A friend, sir?” Fredericks remembered Ransom’s reputation as a mattress jock.

“No. But I wouldn’t mind if she were,” the Admiral said honestly. “She’s fricids with a young Marine officer I know. Went to Annapolis with his father. She called him night before last, with some strange story about a dream she keeps having.”

“Yessir.” Fredericks kept his voice a monotone. He swore he’d talked to every would-be psychic and whacko on the Eastern Seaboard since Project Lodestone started. Some of them twice. What did one more matter?

“I know, Captain. I’ve dealt with my share of nuts. But Major Ryan swears she’s not crazy. But she’s under a lot of stress.”

“Do me a favor. A personal favor. Give her a call. Try to make her feel better. Tell her you’ll check out her story.”

“You can even tell her we’re very interested in her story. I’ll be in New York next . . . Tuesday. Maybe I’ll give her a call myself.”

Fredericks thought of saying something about not liking being an Admiral’s pimp, put a clamp on it.

“Yessir. I’ll call her.”

“Her number’s on a slip inside the magazine. Thank you, Captain. I owe you one.”

“Just doing my job, sir.”

The Admiral left.

Walcott looked at the woman’s picture. She surely was pretty, he thought. Pity she’s a goonie like the others.

He shrugged, keyed the phone on, dialed.

It rang three times, and then cleared.

A sleepy, disheveled face stared out at him.

“Who’s bothering me . . . ? Oh, I’m sorry. Hello.”

Fredericks looked at his watch, realized it was five o’clock in the morning and that, once more, he’d worked around the clock in this windowless tomb in the Pentagon.

He decided the face on the screen was even prettier than the picture, even without makeup.

“Uh, Ms. Edward, I’m Captain Walcott Frederick, and I’m calling from the Pentagon . . .

“Well, Captain?”

“I talked to Ms. Edward, sir. She has recurring dreams about animals, about something ordering animals to do things they don’t normally do. She kept calling this thing a puppetmaster. She also said . . .” Fredericks stopped himself.

“Yes?”

“Sorry, sir. She said she dreamed it was somewhere in the mountains, in Colorado.” He wondered why he hadn’t told the Admiral that Colette had insisted the “puppetmaster” was not of this Earth.

“Just another nut.” Ransom sounded disappointed, then frowned, remembering something. “But maybe not . . . hold on.”

He turned to a screen, touched keys, and watched as reports flashed up, then vanished.

“Here it is. Something you probably didn’t hear about. We reactivated the old Strategic Air Command Center under Cheyenne Mountain when all this nonsense started. We thought maybe we’d need a fairly secure base if the shit really came down. We staffed it with about 200 people. Mostly commo, some security.

“Two months ago, we lost contact. We sent a team out, and found that every one of them had died. Suffocated!”

“How? Weren’t there fail-safe systems?”

Absolute Magnitude

"Of course there were," Ransom said. "But the ducts to the outside had been blocked. With what looked like the mud that swallows use to build their nests."

"The alarms had been short-circuited. Rats, maybe."

"And the backup oxygen systems failed as well."

"Now, how did anybody find out about that place? There were no more than five people who knew: Me, the President, the Veep, a couple of Secret Service types. Period."

"Colorado again," Fredericks murmured.

"Yeah. Maybe you better do a little checking. You have some ideas on how?"

Fredericks considered, then nodded, briskly.

"Yessir."

"Good. Report back if you come up with anything."

66 **W**hat I want," Fredericks said into the scramble-phone, "is a full sweep on any and all frequencies you can monitor that are centered in that area."

"Yessir," the National Security Agency technician said. "Do you want already-known broadcasts monitored?"

"No. At least, not on this sweep. I just want to know anybody who's making a noise, any kind of noise, on any wavelength known."

"Yessir. You have the authorization for whatever you want. I'll get on it myself."

"Good."

The three raccoons scuttled out of the trees and clambered through the half-open window.

A hundred yards away a torrent of water gushed through the penstock of the great dam. The reservoir's water level was almost at the dam's top.

The raccoons wove their way through the gloomy operations center as if they'd been there before, until they reached the control room. Behind them moved a larger shadow that kept close to the walls.

Here there were dials, switches, wheels.

The raccoons scrambled to the top of one panel, and two went to one wheel, and pulled at it. Slowly, then faster, the wheel began to turn.

Outside, the roaring grew louder.

They went to a second, then a third and a fourth wheel, opening the penstocks fully.

The room lights flashed on, and an engineer stood in the door.

"Hey! What the hell are you little bastards—"

He gurgled a dying scream as the cougar guarding the raccoons pounced from behind, razor claws slashing his throat open.

The raccoons opened the last penstock, then climbed down and, in a solemn line, left the operations center.

Nearly the open floodgates of the dam sent a wall of water crashing down the narrow canyon toward the city below.

66 **N**othing," Admiral Ransom said, "broadcasts on that low a frequency. It's even below our submarine SLF satellite band."

"I know, sir."

"All right. So we've got something strange. I think we better start planning to drop some Rangers in there to check the situation out."

"Yessir."

"I'll start a team on the op-plan right now. In the meantime . . . how current are you?"

"Sir, I fly every chance I get, every aircraft. I can get permission to get close to."

"Including the F37?"

"Checked out. But no more than thirty, forty hours."

"That'll have to do. It's an easy ship to fly, and you aren't going to be playing von Richtofen."

"Get out to Dulles. I've detached a squadron of F37's to the Project. Get your butt up to O'Hare, stick Colette Edward in the backseat, and get back here."

"Maybe there is something to her dreams we'll need."

"Yessir. But . . . why in a fighter? Don't we have any executive planes at . . . what's the nearest base, Great Lakes?"

"We don't have time," Ransom said. "Plus the F37 travels a lot higher than most birds. I don't want to lose this Edward to a fucking birdstrike, Captain."

"Now saddle up. I'll call Colette, tell her you're inbound."

"Yessir."

Walcott Fredericks had cleared through 25,000 feet when the capuchin monkey opened its cage. It was in the first class cabin of the De Gaulle-Dulles Air France SST.

Its owner, and the two stewardesses, were drowsing, and didn't notice the tiny, white-faced animal, nor the sharp letter-opener it had snatched, unnoticed, from another passenger's briefcase.

The cockpit door was slightly ajar.

The monkey pushed the door further open.

Carrying the letter-opener like a spear, it crept inside, toward the two pilots, busy with tower chatter and the laydown to Washington.

Walcott Fredericks knocked once, again, at the apartment door. He still wore his flight suit, and the blue Air Force crewcab was waiting outside.

There was no answer.

He knocked again, and heard a scream from inside.

He smashed against the door, felt the lock give, heard the door crash against the deadbolt.

Fredericks moved back against the corridor wall, and took two steps forward, coming up and smashing his boot into the door.

The hinges splintered and the door fell open.

Colette Edward stood halfway across the foyer, holding a butcher knife.

"Who are you? Where's the doorman, Mister Haggarty?"

"Downstairs. I heard a scream. I'm Captain Fredericks."

The woman managed a shaky laugh.

"I fell asleep . . . I was dreaming . . . that dream. Didn't they teach you about knocking in pilot school?"

Fredericks started to say something, then his attention was grabbed by the still-on television, its sound muted. He saw flames gouting out of a familiar building.

Paying no attention to the model, he crossed to the set, turned the volume up:

" . . . not known. We do now know the jet that crashed into the Pentagon an hour ago was an Air France SST, Flight 12 out of Paris. Why it was off its flight pattern, it's . . ."

"That just happened," Colette said. "I couldn't have been asleep more than a few minutes. Some jet crashed into the Pentagon."

Animals Like Us

"I thought maybe you'd gotten killed. I tried to call Bill . . . Admiral Ransom, but they said all lines were out."

"Son of a bitch," Fredericks swore. He sat down on the couch. "Okay. I don't believe in coincidence. Something's making sure we stay behind the eightball, aren't they?"

"What are you talking about?"

Fredericks reached a decision.

"Colette . . . do you want to end that dream?"

"I'll do anything to get rid of it."

"Okay. You get air-sick?"

"No."

"Good. Because we're about to make the fastest trip to Colorado you've ever seen."

"We're going to try to move faster than your puppetmaster can. I think maybe you and me are the only thing people have going right now."

The mole darted out of the hole he'd dug in the dike, and water sprayed out behind it.

It scampered to the top of the polder's bank, and looked down at the salt water rushing like a firehose, as the North Sea poured through the tunnel he'd dug. The stream grew wider, faster, but the mole did not watch any longer.

He, and his brothers, had many more tunnels to dig.

"I don't like this," Walcott said into his microphone. "Hang on." He brought the jet screaming down, past the airfield's tower. There were no lights, nor signs of life.

He let the ship climb to five thousand, then split-essed back.

"There's nothing coming from the tower. No response on assigned freqs, nothing on watch frequencies," he explained into the intercom. "I'm going in anyway. This is the closest field to where we want to go."

He cut power, dumped flaps, and brought the F37 down. He let it roll out, then taxied to where a FOLLOW ME truck sat.

There were two airmen sprawled beside it.

Fredericks shut the plane down, opened the canopy and slid out onto the wing, then jumped to the ground.

He went to the bodies.

It looked as if they'd been stabbed by a company of rippers, their faces and chests torn and lacerated.

"Birds," he guessed, and knew he was right.

He straightened, and hurried back to the plane.

"Come on," he told Colette.

She awkwardly unstrapped, unfastening her flight suit's lines and tubes as he'd shown her.

Fredericks went to the small plane's tiny baggage compartment, and took out the two combat vests he'd requisitioned from the Chicago airbase. There was a pistol holstered on the vest, and grenades in pouches.

Behind the vest was a submachine gun and a stubby double-pistol-gripped tube with a barrel two inches in diameter.

Colette slid down beside him.

He gave her one vest, and the SMG.

"I've shot a pistol, but never one of these."

"It's about the same. Pull this lever back to cock the piece, point at what you want dead, and hold the trigger back. If it kicks away from what you're shooting at, let go, aim and start all over again until you

run out of bullets. Put another magazine in by pushing this button here, and go back to work."

"That's all? Why does it take so long to get to be a soldier?"

Fredericks suddenly found a smile on his face.

"You wouldn't believe how long it takes us to learn how to salute, ma'am. And then there's walking and chewing gum . . ."

A slow grin spread across Colette's face.

"Come on," Walcott said. "Now that I've knocked your socks off flying fighters, let me show you what a klutz I am in a helicopter."

"One of those ships over there's got to work."

The great aircraft carrier rolled in the swells. The intakes to the pile's cooling system had been blocked by carefully-inserted seaweed, and flocks of gulls swooped about its flight deck.

There were still men aboard.

But none of them could come into the open without dying.

The carrier was truly a pitiful, helpless giant.

"Here!" Colette shouted over the helicopter's scream.

But Walcott Fredericks had already recognized the hill from the map he'd gotten from the NSA technician.

"Hang on."

He banked the chopper over the ridge line, pushed the stick forward while rolling off power. At the last minute, he flared the ship and it bounced down, hard.

It teetered sideways on its skids, and he chopped the turbine. The blades wound down, and the silence of the mountains surrounded them.

He opened the cockpit door, slung the rocket-launcher over one shoulder, and got out of the ship.

He'd never felt real fear before.

But now his palms were slick, and his mouth dry, terribly dry.

The Swarm "felt" something, a danger, a threat.

Colette wormed to the top of the hill beside Fredericks.

"Down there is the cave entrance," she said.

"You're sure?"

She looked at him.

"Sorry," Walcott said. He helped her to his feet.

Crouched, they went down the hill.

The hillside was utterly silent. He didn't hear bird-song, nor the chatter of squirrels.

There was brush blocking the mouth of the cave.

Walcott pushed it aside. He heard the hum of machinery.

The rock walls were polished, as if a sculptor had carved the entrance out of the living rock.

Walcott went into the cave, the woman behind him.

It was dark for a few yards, and then he could see dimly as they came into a huge main chamber.

Colette gasped.

The ship sat on skids in the middle of the chamber. It was ovoid, but its base spread, as if it had begun to melt.

It was utterly, completely alien.

A thick tube ran from the ship into a second chamber the light was coming from.

Colette pointed to the other room. *In there. In there's where the puppetmaster holds the bars and strings.*

Weapon ready, Fredericks moved forward, gut turning at what he was afraid to see.

Absolute Magnitude

The rock walls of the inner chamber were hung with screens, panels, blurring in a myriad of colors Fredericks could never imagine.

In the center was the alien, encased in a four-legged suit almost fifteen feet high. The helmet atop it was shrouded.

Slowly it turned toward Fredericks.

He knew if he saw the alien's face he would go mad.

He brought the rocket-launcher up, sliding off its safety lock.

His finger was on the firing switch when the grizzly bear that had followed them from the helicopter rose out of the darkness and his great paw smashed Fredericks' chest.

His body contorted, muscle spasm sending the rocket launcher flying.

Colette screamed, lifted the submachine gun. The bear's jaws closed on her head, fangs tearing deep into her skull.

The bear shook Colette's corpse like a dog shakes a rag, then dropped her body.

It stared at the alien, but no other instructions came.

It grunted, dropped to all fours, and shambling out of the cave.

The Swarm "saw" the two bodies, "felt" elation, content.

This was the last threat. This had been the only challenge.

This world belonged to the Swarm.

In its triumph, the Swarm never noticed the team of five field mice, industriously gnawing away at his life support tube.



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E. Jay O'Connell's fiction has appeared in *Pirate Writings*, *Aboriginal*, and *Galaxy*. His computer artwork has graced the covers of *Pirate Writings* and the anthology *New Altars*. This is his first appearance in *Absolute Magnitude*.

Dying of a Kiss

by E. Jay O'Connell

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Michael leaned his com against a pulsing rootlet and rubbed spots from his eyes. The sun was setting again. He'd gotten a little farther today. Maybe.

He missed Raine. It had been over a month since he'd touched her cool flesh. The thought brought a shiver of revulsion. And excitement. He'd promised himself never again. More than once.

Rippling sheets of magenta coursed along the horizon as the sun fell into the clouds. Sky-slants wafted through the swirling mists, the tree-things encrusting them, writhing like anemones.

He stared up at the alien constellations emerging from the indigo sky. Nothing looked familiar—to him or the ship. He shivered. So far from home.

The trunk of the tree-thing throbbed warmly against his back, the cool breeze of his island's passage through the sky gentle on his face. He should have been hungry—he hadn't eaten that day. He hugged himself, the warmth of its arms against his ribs a comfort. He needed to eat more.

Raine used to remind him. She'd bring him sandwiches. He closed his eyes and saw her snapping off the monitor in their dorm room, smiling. "Come to bed. I'm cold." He threw heat like a furnace. She was always cool, except where their skin touched.

Oh Christ, Michael thought, I'm doing it again.

Seven moonlets rose into the deepening black as the sunset burned itself out, the moons catching the light in silver arcs like sickles. The com's equations cast their sterile glow over the slowly twisting rootlets at his feet, mocking him.

To get back home, he needed to recalibrate the ship's translation core. The other repairs were trivial—the ship's hull would heal in a matter of hours. Of course, the translation equations were so abstruse that the memetic systems that had derived them were themselves half-mad.

Perhaps he would go mad in the same way, and be able to return home to restore Raine from backup. Neither of them had automatic resurrection clauses at EDS. Parallelism was more than a sin on Earth—it was in bad taste.

He walked barefoot down the hillside with the com tucked under one arm, the pale grass now shivery slick with the evening's dew. There was that warmth and pressure welling up behind his eyes, the painful tightening in his chest.

Yes. He was doing it again.

The ship was embedded in the rocky core of the island, the rough ellipsoid of his flying prison canted ever so slightly off center from the weight of it. When they had punched through spacetime to wherever this was, the ship had materialized, protruding from the island's lower surface like a bulging metallic tumor. There should have been an explosion—but there wasn't. Why the added mass hadn't crashed the island was beyond him.

He padded down the foot-worn 'steps he'd cut through the glistening stone, brushing both walls with his fingertips as the darkness swallowed him. The digging beam worked wonderfully, evaporating the stone into streams of hissing gas. He'd gotten good with the beam, after a while.

It was a hundred and fourteen darkening steps to the airlock door. He skipped over broken step number forty seven. At the foot of the stairs, a red shipspe flashed, scanned and recognized him in a heartbeat.

"Are you feeling alright, sir? You look ill. Perhaps you'd better get something to eat."

Michael ignored it. He didn't talk to the ship. He didn't talk to himself.

The lock cycled—a useless delay, considering the state of the hull, but he allowed the ship its quirks, as it allowed him his. He stepped into the oak-paneled hallway that curved along the ship's perimeter. The rug here was very dirty, stained ochre and silver from the grass.

The hall glowed to life before him, dimmed behind him, as the ship conserved power for some unforeseen catastrophe. Ridiculously frugal. It had enough power for several millennia of life-support.

Michael stared at the haggard man in the medical bay's full-length mirror. His graying hair stood up in greasy spikes. His jaw was stained with a spotty five-day growth. That wouldn't do.

He cleaned himself up, luxuriating in the hot spray of the fresher, his mind an empty, animal slate as the water pounded into him. He shaved afterwards, the water-softened stubble scraped away easily under the shaving wand. Beards were such itchy, ugly things.

Raine hated them.

The fiber optic he'd run from the ship's resurrection chamber lay along the hallway like a serpent, jacked into the angled coffin of the aut surgeon two doors down. The rooms were kept separate purposefully. One was for repair. One was for recreating you from digital storage after the killing passage through spacetime. They were quite different things.

At least, they were supposed to be.

Michael coughed, and committed a crime against humanity. "Invoke heal program code Phoenix Omega."

The shipspe on the aut surgeon blinked. "There is no patient in the casket."

"Emergency Override Code 17." He could have written a macro to take care of all this with a single word, of course. But it would only have made the process easier.

The aut surgeon's transparent lid misted with steam as it filled with protoplasm, and Raine's body began to jell. It took about twenty minutes. He stood and waited patiently. He always watched.

Now came the really stupid part. A crude hack. "Run simulation Persephone."

Absolute Magnitude

"Warning. The datastore representing Raine Quine is corrupt. The use of this data for resurrection purposes is forbidden by the Humanic Code—"

The canned warning droned on uselessly. He'd never bothered to remove it.

When the buffer flashed full, Michael tapped the switch epoxied beside the fiber-optic input shunt. He'd used the digger to flash a hole in the side of the autosurgeon, bypassed its motherboard. He was abusing a process meant for transferring the contents of a mind from one body to another—this process itself almost a violation of Code, it was intended only for full-body burn victims.

The glass slid open, revealing Raine ensconced in the black leather of the autosurgeon's embrace, her nude flesh glowing with false health. She looked a little younger each time, though he knew it was just his getting older.

Her eyes fluttered and she smiled, as always, before furrowing her brows. "I feel strange."

"Hangover," he whispered thickly. "We drank too much last night." True, of course, though it had been so many years for her.

"Oh." She wriggled in the autosurgeon's embrace. Her hair fell down over her breasts in a soft red wave. Were it functioning normally, the surgeon would have helped her to her feet. Of course, it was off-line now.

"What the hell is wrong with this thing?" she looked so confused. He felt vaguely sick to his stomach. A shrug was best at this point.

She struggled, her youthful body heartbreakingly beautiful, her nipples erect in the cool ship air. She reached out to him. He kept his hands in his pockets.

"Help me?"

"Nah." If he touched her now she'd seize inside five minutes. He'd explored those minutes very thoroughly. "If I so much as touch you we'll end up in bed again. You're going to wear it down to a bloody stump."

She grinned and squinted. "You bastard." She wasn't seeing very well, the visual cortex was corrupted, but she wouldn't notice that for awhile. Fortunately, really, for he looked so much older than when she knew him. In another year, or two, he'd have to start dying his hair.

"Follow me." He strode from the medical bay, down the curving hall, keeping three paces ahead of her the entire time. Her footsteps followed his unsteadily, rasping gently against the carpet. Looking back would end it all now. She would rush into his arms, and die.

Her voice came unsteadily over his shoulder. "What's wrong? Where are we?"

"It doesn't matter, love."

"It doesn't?"

A nasty sweet shiver up his spine at that, for he'd never heard her say it before. A new branching, and so soon!

They passed through the breach in the ship's outer hull, into a room cut from the living rock of the island. The rough-hewn walls were streaked with a lighter material that glistened silver in the

moonlight. He'd covered the floor with a mat woven from a dried purple grass that grew on the port slope of his island.

Here and there at the room's periphery, stone nudes gleamed, their generous breasts and bellies rimmed in the silver light. He'd seen no point in sculpting men. He'd gotten pretty good with the digging laser, over the years.

The nudes had no faces, just polished ovoid heads. He couldn't do faces, for some reason.

The far wall was open to the night sky, admitting the cool breeze of their passage, and the smell of the tree things, like cardamom and myrrh. The temperature never changed here. Always autumn cool, a temperature he used to love.

Raine lowered herself unsteadily onto a cushion, Michael tossed her a blue velvet robe, which she struggled into. She had some motor impairment. It was hard to watch.

She looked up at him as if noticing him for the first time, her green eyes wide. "Are you mad at me?"

She could seize at any instant. "Yes. Yes I am."

"Why?"

"Because you slept with Paul."

"Oh." She looked confused. Would she remember Paul? Had she slept with him? He'd always wondered. They'd all gone to high school together, he'd been her first boyfriend. She'd always said it was the responsibility of everyone's first lover to ruin you for life.

She hadn't wanted to talk about it.

"I did, didn't I?" she smiled coyly. "Don't worry, love. He wasn't very good. Nothing compared to you," she smiled up at him. "Come here."

Michael stood just beyond her arm's reach, and shook his head in the dimness, aching but dry-eyed, trying to imagine her moving under Paul's skinny body—failing

and succeeding, to varying degrees.

She flinched. "Michael? What's wrong with me? Is there something wrong with my mind?"

Lucid already. He closed his eyes.

"Yes," he heard himself say. "Your datastore was corrupted in translation." The words just popped out. He'd never told her that. He'd always feared that it would kill her immediately. So many things did. Touching her in the surgeon. A drink of water. Giving her clothing before they got to this room he'd built for her.

Kissing her. Always.

He kept his eyes closed, as she stood, crossed the distance between them with a single step, and ran her hands over his chest. He expected at any second for her to collapse to the matting.

"There was never anyone else," she whispered. "Really. I always knew I'd end up with you. Paul was so sad, and ugly, and oh, so lonely. I had to do it. I had to. He said he would die if I didn't." She laughed. "You know, I was so young and stupid I almost believed him."



Dying of a Kiss

She ran her hands down his stomach, played with the waistband of his pants, dipped lower.

"Such a silly thing." She stroked him. "So troublesome." Her hands were cool, his flesh warm then burning hot. He was hard, his breath hissing through his nostrils, his eyes still closed. If he kept his eyes closed, she didn't die! The crash was in the gaze!

Her hands stopped moving. "Michael. Stop doing this. I'm dead. I have to go."

He opened his eyes. She was staring into him, her lips parted. She licked his lips, playfully, the sensation ripping through Michael's head like an electric shock, swirling in his chest, making it hard to breathe.

"Love me?"

"Yes," he breathed.

"Kiss me?"

He did. So she died.

Her skin went cold, as he crushed her body in a grip that would have squeezed the life from it, had there been any left. Her ribs creaked, as he bit into a smooth pale shoulder, tasting coppery blood and his own tears.

He threw her over the railing into the mists. He knew that he couldn't resist her body, not even the empty shell: it would only feel worse, afterwards.

She'd known she was dead.

He'd just had to remind her.

In his tiny bedroom, on the hard cot he slept in alone, he spoke with the ship.

"Access datastore, Ra ne Quine."

The ship's voice was low and sad. "I'm sorry. There is no file by that name in storage. Nearest possible match?"

He swallowed past the tightness in his throat, walked to the window he'd hacked in the hull over his bunk. The moons had arranged themselves into a shape that you could just barely see as a face. If you were lonely enough.

The ship had power and life-support and geriatric drugs for something like a thousand years. If he could get home, he could still resurrect her from backup. So he couldn't die. Not while there was a chance. Even if he wanted to.

One thousand years. His hands gripped the lumpy sill of the crude window, the fingertips white with pressure.

"Dear God," he whispered, the first words he'd said out loud to himself in almost a decade.

"Don't let it take that long."



Absolute Magnitude

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The White Hole #16

by Alan Dean Foster

POWDER—Available on cable and video

Starring: Lance Hendriksen, Mary Steenburgen, Jeff Goldblum, Sean Patrick Flanery.

Odd John and *Slan* this is not, but *Powder* is a mildly compelling Hollywood attempt to tell the story of an isolated and abandoned *homo superior* in terms that neither invoke the divine intervention of the deity-of-the-day nor the machinations of a stock mad scientist. That its producers cannot distinguish between magnetism and electricity shows that Damon Knight's famous review of the scientific boners in Hall and Flint's 1921 *The Blind Spot* still has relevance in today's cinematic marketplace.

Powder is the nickname of an albino teenage boy found living in the basement of his grandparents' Texas country house by the authorities, led by Sheriff Hendriksen, who have responded to the place in the wake of the grandfather's death. Fearing/suspecting that he may suffer from some form of mental illness as well as a deficiency of melanin, counselor Mary Steenburgen is called in to check on him. She finds a shy, reluctant youth who can not only quote Moby Dick page by page, but who claims to have memorized every word of every book in his extensive personal basement library.

So naturally, and in accordance with the standard Hollywood technique of not wasting time on exposition (no: to mention reason or logic) this highly sensitive mental wizard is promptly dumped into Steenburgen's home for highly antisocial male wards of the state, the better to facilitate understanding him. Taking him to a university, a center for scientific research, or placing him with kindly foster parents is never proposed. No conflict there, you see.

Immediately challenged by the local bully (a consequence the highly accredited Steenburgen naturally does not foresee), Powder attempts to charm the savage beast by magnetizing all the spoons in the dining hall and using them to create an abstract sculpture. Confronted by a power they can barely believe and cannot begin to comprehend, the bully and his cohorts, in the best Hollywood tradition, promptly proceed to act as if nothing has happened. Later in the film, when they brutalize Powder in the midst of an advancing

thunderstorm, he throws off a burst of energy that stops the heart of his main tormentor, which he then subsequently restarts.

Exhibiting a reaction irrational enough to stun the average eight-year old, one of the bully's friends then attempts to go after Powder yet again, only to be restrained by his companions. Perhaps if Powder had blown several of them to bits—naw, if the script required the reaction, the survivors would still come after him. People react so illogically in studio films that the audience has long since learned to go along with joke. I mean, if a friend and I were fighting with some guy and he threw off a burst of incandescent energy that blew us twenty feet away and stopped my buddy's heart, I think it would be inclined not to challenge him further but to depart at speed.

During a classroom experiment with a Van de Graaff generator, Powder not only draws lightning from the generator but from the wall behind it. Twin bolts lift him off the ground and burn a hole in his shirt before science teacher Goldblum can smash the generator. Kicking the plug out of its socket would achieve the same result, but with out the visual satisfaction that comes from breaking things in movies. Every kid in the class observes this incredible occurrence. Does anybody call CNN? Hard Copy? Hugh Downs? Anybody?

Nope. Must be too many other stories crowding out the news. No room on even a local station for "Small Town Boy Levitated by Lightning." In *Powder*, only the county exists, and not the world outside. That's Texas country folk for you. Somehow it all smacks of a Jeff Foxworthy routine.

There is a deathbed scene involving Powder, the Sheriff, and the Sheriff's cancer-stricken wife that goes on long enough for the viewer to break for popcorn, a soda, and a quick look at the evening news before she finally expires.

While applied sparingly, the film's sfx are well done. And even though we know we are being bludgeoned with unreason throughout the course of the film, we still feel for Powder and his situation. Readers of science-fiction will respond more readily than most, not only because they are familiar with the milieu, but because they have often been made to feel like

outsiders.

Oh yes—in addition to magnetizing steel, drawing lightning, allowing a hunter to experience the death of a deer he has just mortally wounded, and emitting electrical bursts capable of disrupting television reception, Powder can also read minds. Still, nobody calls the local TV station or newspaper.

Additionally, every actor in the picture suffers from the "Star Trek—The Movie" wonderment syndrome—standing around too long with their jaws dropped in amazement. Only the laid-back Goldblum manages to inject some sense of characterization and humanity into his role. A fine actor, Hendriksen is miscast in a part calling for someone like Harry Dean Stanton, and ill-served by the direction, which requires him to out-stolidify Buster Keaton on a bad day. Steenburgen brings nothing to a role that a Susan Sarandon or Meryl Streep could have laden with subtleties—but the Sarandons and Streeps don't do movies like *Powder*, which is a shame. In addition to Goldblum, only Sean Patrick Flanery as the title character invests his role with something akin to a real personality.

The conclusion, in which the producers attempt to do a solo variant on *Childhood's End*, suggests that they know what they are trying to accomplish but don't have a clue how to do it. Waiting for an explanation from one of the principle characters, assembled in an open field where Powder has just been sucked up into the storm clouds, the audience gets only wild-eyed stares followed by the closing credits.

★★½ (out of five) for a frustrating, intermittently absorbing, fascinating failure that leaves you wanting to handcuff the writer-director to a couple of good SF novels about the next step up in human evolution.

WINGS OF HONNEAMISE—Available on laserdisc and video Dir/Screenplay: Hiroyuki Yamaga—120 min..

"A visually sensational two-hour extravaganza" sez the usually reliable Roger Ebert on the cover. "A spectacular example of Japanimation" breathlessly proclaims Richard Harrington of the Washington Post.

Absolute Magnitude

They must have seen a different film than I did.

Wings tells the story of mankind's first flight into space from the viewpoint of the inhabitants of another world that looks and acts just like ours except for the neat graphic design. A parallel universe retelling of the film (as opposed to the Tom Wolfe book) *The Right Stuff*, with a bit more acerbic humor thrown in, *Wings* has to struggle to achieve turgid. In fact, the bon mots and casual asides of the discouraged "royal space force" cadets are the best thing in the movie.

Visually, where it might be expected to excel, *Wings* is no *Akira*. It's not even a decade-old *Lensman*. Having lavished all their attention on the background detail of everything from advertising signs to headgear, the producers have nothing left for the script. While competent, the production design and animation reaches none of the heights asserted reviews such as the aforementioned claim for it. Dozens of available anime surpass it.

Worst of all is the story, which takes forever to progress to a conclusion not half so grand as its objective. Very little happens along the way to the inevitable, managing never to engage our interest in the course of the exposition. Me, I'm still waiting for a clean video release of the legendary *Laputa*. Now that's an anime that's worth your time. ★, for some mildly witty military academy-style banter.

INTO THE WEST—Available on video and cable. Dir. Mike Newell—91 min.

Here's a cinematic fable that is as significant for what it does not do or show as much as for what it does. It's also one of the best written fantasy films in years: a film in which character is more important than action.

An old man is camped with his gypsy wagon on the west coast of Ireland when a magnificent white horse suddenly appears on the beach nearby. When he departs, the horse, unafraid, tags along. The oldest is one of a tribe of contemporary Irish gypsies, a people also known as the travelers.

The horse follows him all the way into the city, as blasted and stultifying a sump of concrete decay as anything to be found in the Bronx or Shanghai, a place where children gambol playfully around open fires and the only form of municipal art is the crude graffiti that covers every blank gray wall. Here we encounter the old man's son, Papa Reilly (played with finely etched despair by Gabriel Byrne) and his two offspring, 12-year-old Tito and 8-year-old Ossie. Both boys take an

immediate shine to the horse, and it to them. The innocent Ossie mounts it immediately and with ease, much to both the father and grandfather's surprise, and proceeds to jump an open bonfire.

Reilly's beloved wife Mary died giving birth to Ossie, a cataclysmic event in his life which has reduced the embittered Reilly to living in the city among the "settled," where to make a few pounds he repairs cars on the side and on the cheap. What isn't spent on food and a shabby, run-down high-rise apartment ends up being disposed of in the pub.

When grandfather takes his leave of the town, the horse remains behind with the boys, who naively and hopefully believe it can live in the apartment with them. But when it starts kicking holes in the walls, the neighbors call the police, who eventually cart the horse away—but not before one crooked cop watches it clear a road-blocking police car in a single impossible leap.

He promptly informs a wealthy businessman and owner of steeplechase horses of this phenomenon, allowing that worthy to "buy" the horse from the Reillys with the understanding that sooner or later, the cop will obtain the apparent owner's signature on a legitimate bill of sale. This he attempts to do by having his men interrogate and bully the frightened Reilly into complying, only to learn that the distraught father cannot write.

Much later, after posting childishly hopeful notices offering a reward for information around the city, the boys see the horse competing in a jumping competition on TV. Next thing we know, they've found their way to the stables and made off with it. They decide to ride it "into the west," where their yarn-spinning grandfather claims it must have come from. Timanog, as the old man calls the horse, supposedly lives beneath the sea in a land where youth is eternal and no one grows old.

There follows an entirely unsentimental, un-Disneyfied odyssey across the often bleak, barren, and hostile Irish countryside, a very different place from the lush emerald landscape of Ford's *The Quiet Man* and the glossy idealized ads of Aer Lingus. With the help of two traveler friends, including a vibrant and admirably restrained Ellen Barkin, the father pursues his boys, hoping to catch up with them before the businessman and the cops. I will not give away the ending, except to say that it is satisfyingly warm and sufficiently enigmatic to be open to gratifyingly ambiguous interpretation.

The two boys, resourceful and inspired by both their traveler heritage and years of watching cowboy-and-Indian movies (including, in a nice genre touch, *Back to the Future Part III*), succeed in outwitting and outtracing their pursuers in perfectly logical and reasonable ways, without the aid of the usual deus-ex-machina cinematic plot devices. As the asthmatic young Ossie, Clavin Fitzgerald strikes just the right note of intelligence without suffering from the nauseating precocity so commonly found in child actors. Ruaidhri Conroy as the older brother looks and acts like the youthful version of an aged leprechaun, forced to be wise beyond his years. These are real children, with all their faults and wonderments and worries, instead of the gussied-up Hollywood kewpie dolls we usually see in "kids" films.

Byrne is fine as the agonized father who lost his wife and whose life and reason for living, as a consequence, have gone missing. The end of the film when he is reunited with his children provides the closure he has unconsciously been searching for since his wife's death, as well as suggesting a motive for Timanog's presence.

The film is full of wonderful touches, large and small. When the horse transports the boys to the gravesite of their mother, there is a sparsely scripted and very touching small scene where young Ossie asks his brother if his mother ever saw him before she died. It is exactly the sort of startlingly adult question children sometimes unexpectedly ask of their elders, and it is played perfectly by the juvenile leads. Stuck in a strange town during a chilly downpour, Ossie asks for money to go see a movie in a warm theater and eat popcorn, even though they have only enough money for one of them to do so. Acting like an often thoughtless (and therefore perfectly normal) eight-year-old, he leaves his brother out in the damp and cold while he goes in to enjoy the film. The emotional note the scene strikes is right on, and life with unspoken hurt.

While we see that Barkin's character sympathizes with and is attracted to Byrne, there is no love scene between them, as would be de rigueur in any comparable Hollywood film. These are two adults who manage to convey mutual attraction and respect without so much as holding hands.

When Byrne is roughly hauled off to the police station to be questioned about the abduction of the horse by his boys, one of the jostling reporters at the scene asks about his political affiliations—an entirely Irish touch

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that might be lost on some American viewers. Watching Tito sitting in a dump trying to pound the dents out of a steel pail, possibly so he can sell it, we are allowed to see without being told the unspoken connection with his mechanically inclined father, earlier observed pounding the dents out of a damaged car.

Behind it all looms the great white horse, a fantasy symbol in films since the days of the silents (Douglas Fairbanks' mount in *The Thief of Bagdad*, Lillian Gish's equine-personified insanity in *The Wind*). Without it ever being stated, we are aware from the first that this no ordinary animal, that it is a horse with a purpose, and that purpose is revealed through the characters and the story rather than being bluntly stated by the filmmakers. The horse knows what it wants, where it needs to go, and why it must connect with the children. Through adroit editing and patient cinematography (it's hard to cue a horse to look where you want it to) we are made to understand its intelligence and compassion without having to resort to Mr. Ed—like machinations.

Any anticipated big special-effects laden finale is left wholly to our imagination, the most fecund cinematic device available. In place of sfx there is a wonderful score, all tremulous strings, airy woodwinds, and evanescent Irish tunes, that carries us along and underscores the action as effectively as any bolts of digital lightning or animated clouds—proving that one *Into the West* is worth a hundred *Kazaans*.

Into the West takes the time to introduce us to real characters, to let them develop before us so that we get to know them as individuals instead of ciphers whose purpose is simply to advance the plot. At the same time, the pace is not allowed to drag to the extent that it does in, for example, that other recent Irish-based fantasy, John Sayles's ethereal but sometimes interminable *The Secret of Roan Inish*. It's the kind of writing to be expected from Jim Sheridan, who was also the screenwriter of the Oscar-winning *My Left Foot*.

★★★★, for reality-based characters, for what is implied instead of thrown in our faces, for the care and love with which it has been made, and for the willingness to take chances within a genre so often accented solely by jejune imitation.

Bambi - Available on laserdisc and video

A re-issue of the 1942 classic, cleaned-up and restored. Previously only available on laserdisc as a scratchy Japanese import, this

remains my favorite Disney full-length animated feature, moreso even than *Fantasia*.

Incorporating a degree of naturalism unparalleled in Disney films before or since, this direct antecedent of *The Lion King* relies more heavily on mood, atmosphere, and music than any other of the Disney narrative features. It's difficult to envision an animated film where the backgrounds are every bit as important to the story as the characters, but *Bambi* makes a case for landscape as protagonist.

For those of you who know and love the film, there is no reason for me to repeat the story here. For those who do not, I am not about to spoil it for you. Suffice to say that *Bambi* is a stellar example of what animation can do that live action cannot.

A few observations and comments without giving too much away: somebody needs to ask John Williams if he was inspired to write the brooding music that marks the appearance of the great white shark in *Jaws* by composer Frank Churchill's similar use of ominous approaching chords to signify the presence of man in *Bambi*.

Proof that the dictum "less is more" works as well in feature-length animation as in any other art form: the fact that while man is present in the forest, we never see him. Here we know him only by his works—hunting dogs trained to kill, a neglected campfire, the sound of gunfire.

In what other film is the audience brought to near panic by the outburst of a hysterical pheasant? Where else could an untrained, unprofessional four-year old make such an impact? Note the mastery of the artists in conveying not just how animals look, but how they move.

Extras on the CAV laserdisc set include a "making-of" segment from a 1957 episode of the TV Disneyland series, the original 1942 theatrical trailer (a genuine hoot, showing that the distributor had no idea how to promote the film), the trailer for the 1988 theatrical release (much more in tune with contemporary sensibilities), and a fascinating excerpt on one of the landmarks in animation technology, the multiplane camera. Not to mention a brief guest appearance by the adult Peter Behn, the voice of Thumper.

Here's a film that will leave you twitterpated. An all-time classic. FIVE STARS, for never-surpassed original story (by Felix Salten), unsurpassed artistry, a superbly un-saccharine score, and some uncompromising looks at death, sex, and

growing up in a world less Disneyfied than any one until *Beauty and the Beast*.

Computer Products Alert

COMDEX, held every winter in Las Vegas, is not only the computer industry's largest venue for debuting new products and for promoting itself, it is also the biggest trade show held in the United States. With substantially more than 100,000 people crammed into the Las Vegas convention center and ancillary venues, it is almost impossible to get around. Arriving and departing at the various show sites, whether by private auto, taxi, or limo, is a nightmare no computer can solve, with waits of up to twenty minutes simply to get from the nearest street to the entrance.

The reward for keeping one's head above water in this sea of surging product placement is a look at everything everybody is doing, from Intel and IBM to the smallest software vendor. Of all the innovations and products shown at the last COMDEX, computer buffs should take note of three in particular.

The first is Intel's MMX chip and its attendant technology. Already being heavily sold and promoted, the MMX places a number of instructions on the processor chip itself that were formerly the exclusive preserve of expensive video cards. The catch is that to take full advantage of the technology, video-heavy software such as 3-D games must be written with MMX specifications in mind. But you're still supposed to get 10-20% improved graphics performance on your older software with MMX technology.

What this means for computer users who are not especially graphics oriented is that prices on high-end machines using Intel's non-MMX Pentium chips are falling rapidly. High-end users want the latest technology, whether they're going to utilize it or not, and that means moving up to MMX. So if you're looking for a 200 MHz machine with 32M or more of RAM that doesn't incorporate MMX, now might be a pretty good time to buy.

A number of manufacturers debuted stand-alone flat-screen monitors up to 42" in size. These can either sit on a desk on a simple stand, or hang on the wall. Of them all, Viewsonic and Panasonic's seemed closest to reaching the market. Viewsonic's people suggested a spring release date with a street price for their 15" monitor of around \$1,400. The picture is sharp and clear and the adjustment controls easy to use. While priced out of range for the average home user, there

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will be a rush to purchase by companies frustrated by a lack of usable desk space. Travel agencies, for example. And techies can awe their friends and neighbors with the latest in video technology. With accelerated production and competition, prices should come down fairly rapidly, and a 17" monitor will be available soon.

As for the larger screens, Phillips promises a 20" flat-screen TV by fall of this year. In the battle between gas-plasma and LCD technology, LCD appears to have the edge at this time.

Last, and to me the most significant of the new developments, is USB. Standing for Universal Systems Bus, this promises to finally simplify the jungle of wires required to connect computer peripherals. Utilizing a small cable and a telephone-size plug, the user will be able to link peripherals without worrying about specifics. No more parallel ports and cables, no more serial ports and cables. Just USB. The Sony VAIO computers, for example, already come equipped with two USB ports on the back in addition to the usual serial and parallel ports.

USB also allows multiple linking in any sequence. For example, you could plug your mouse and speakers into your monitor instead of your console, or the monitor into the keyboard, and USB will sort everything out for you. Links of up to 128 separate peripherals are possible, if not necessarily practical.

DEMO '97

DEMO is to COMDEX what the World Fantasy convention is to the World Science-Fiction convention: a much smaller and more exclusive gathering, in this case of the mavens of the world of software. Furthermore, DEMO focuses exclusively on new products just coming to market. This is where developers debut their products in the hopes of enticing fresh investment in their companies. The approximately 1,000 attendees represent the best and brightest of the industry. It's sobering to sit in a ballroom surrounded by between five and ten billion dollars worth of investment banking and software development, not to mention the CEO's of dozens of major companies.

By way of comparison, high-end SF cons give attendees bags of books as freebies. Upon check-in, attendees at DEMO receive event-customized laptop computer bags, in addition to the usual t-shirts and travel coffee mugs. Next time you're tempted to gripe about the cost of joining a Worldcon, you

might muse on DEMO's four-figure attending fee.

Be alert for some astonishing new home software, particularly from Metatools (the company that brought you GOO), as well as plug-ins for making the Internet even more user-friendly. The hottest Internet developments are in software that allows for real-time video streaming, and talk is starting to build about making the net a real competitor to television. What many of the bankers and developers don't seem to realize, however, is that without true real-time interactivity, on-line video is just technologically inferior TV.

For a taste of what's possible now, as well as what is to come, check out www.Magicmaker.com, a cutting-edge cyberentertainment project in which I happen to be intimately involved. Lemme tell you, trying to keep creatively ahead of what is technologically possible while waiting for the delivery technology to catch up with your ideas is a good way to strain your brain. DEMO '97 showed glimpses of how true interactive storytelling can be made a good deal more viable—and within the coming year.

Collectibles?

The March catalog for *The Sharper Image*, a long-time purveyor of high-tech gadgetry including everything from night-vision scopes to linear magnet shavers, leads off with a cover and three pages of nothing but *Star Wars* stuff.

SW gluttons can opt for a hairy bust of Chewbacca for a cool \$298, assorted lithographs (\$225-\$295), a replica X-wing fighter with its own display case in an edition of 1977 (for obvious reasons) and, for the home that has everything, a 7 1/2 foot tall Darth Vader complete to life-system control computer, temperature regulation belt, and respiratory sensor matrix with working instrument lights. Lightsaber replica on belt and blaster in hand. A mere bagatelle at \$5,750. Sorry, FedEx delivery not available.

And in case you ever wondered how Vader's technosuit was powered, we now know. Unlike James Earl Jones or David Prowse, he plugs into a wall outlet.

Sharper Image apparently did well enough with its previous offerings of life-size, studio-quality reproductions of the Alien and the Predator to move on to *Star Wars* figures for adults (they also offer a carbon-frozen Han

Solo). It's interesting to extrapolate on this new line of spin-off marketing. I expect to see the Karloff Frankenstein and Lugosi Dracula any time now from Universal.

But why restrict this new business to icons of science fiction? Why not a life-size, studio quality Marilyn Monroe in the famous Seven-Year itch pose? Or Rielt and Scarlett from *GWTW*? How about famous presidents (imagine being able to plug Honest Abe into your very own wall socket), or historical figures from da Vinci to Einstein. With a little simple robotic work, you could have your very own life-size Beethoven conducting behind you while you slump in front of the stereo. Missa Silymus.

This will get better—or worse, depending on your perspective. With new polyurethane molding techniques married to commercial (as opposed to existing industrial) scanning and mapping software, it should be possible to make reasonably priced life-sized realistic dups of anyone who ever lived. Your ex-girl or boyfriend, for example, or that harridan relative inconveniently out of your clutches. Or great-grandpa Rukotski, who'd look great in that empty corner. Or ... Must ... stop ... now. Dangerous ... overload ... on ... mind ... also ... pocketbook.



I Can Jack Your Gray
by Shauna Skye

I can ...
jack your gray
plug your cortex
mechanise your mind
o brain-wave hopper
genius jotter
bond ideas to mine
hook me, link me
bite me, try it
won't get very far
'cause I'm o brain-wave hopper
genus jotter
your ideas 'ave now
become mine



JackBack

by J. Scott Crawford

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Tyler Underwood stared apprehensively at the heads-up display reflected across his windshield, its pale green luminosity suspended in space against the gray-clotted salmon of the autumn Georgia twilight. The Gingrich Memorial Expressway this far north of the Atlanta Perimeter was nearly free of traffic, and the whistling keen of air over the sleek lines of Tyler's midnight Jaguar yielded only to an occasional blast of wind as he blew past the debris littering the shoulder of the flat black highway—a doorless refrigerator, the rusted skeleton of an abandoned gas hog, the carcass of a rain-soaked recliner. Dingy tract housing mixed with red clay and dead grass in Tyler's peripheral vision, erecting blurry ramparts against the encroachment of the desolate Woodstock slums saddled on either side. Unconsciously, he nudged his toe a little deeper into the accelerator pedal.

Tyler seldom accepted service contracts this far north of his home within the Perimeter, but this one had been worth the inconvenience. Celebrities were a strange lot, and if one of them were foolish enough to build a house in the most dangerous suburb of the Greater Atlanta area, Tyler was only too happy to drive up to Cumming and install an alien server module on the house's operating system—for twice the market rate, of course. A local tech could have done the same job for next to nothing, Tyler knew, but *La Madame* had insisted on a contract with a name firm from the old city. Her money, her choice.

The installation was a simple one—really beneath Tyler's level of expertise—but the constant assault of silly questions and interruptions from *La Madame* and her retinue of toadies had made the job twice as difficult. Consequently, he was now several hours behind schedule and pressed to beat the setting sun to the safety of the old city. Anywhere north of the Atlanta Perimeter was unhealthy, even during daylight hours; Tyler certainly didn't want to be here at night.

Twenty miles.

Glancing briefly at the status template on the Jag's steering wheel, Tyler spoke his wife's name aloud. The pickup to the car's cell phone should have dialed his home number automatically, but the connect light remained dim. Disgusted, he slapped his access code into the template's touchscreen for a diagnostic on the car's onboard computer system. The phone had pulled the same thing on the way up this morning, but he had dismissed it as a network glitch when the diagnostic found no problems. One more false nominal, Tyler thought, and part of *La Madame's* fee is gone for a new com system.

The heads-up blinked off another minute. The Jaguar's leather bucket seat was designed to mold itself to the driver's body, but Tyler still squirmed in its embrace, unable to find a comfortable position. The onboard diagnostic reported no errors.

Nineteen miles.

Tyler leaned forward to check the progress of the setting sun, then gunned his engine just a little more.

The hold pattern on Mark's console display swirled elegantly in a silver and blue spiral. Mark considered the pattern's soothing flow as he sprawled lazily across his living room sofa, absently twiddling the remote between his thumb and forefinger while the system completed its uplink. He had often thought of downloading one of the more trendy hold patterns—a shimmering transporter effect, perhaps—but always ultimately decided to stay with this, his favorite. Old fashioned, maybe, but he seldom went in for the shallow diversions, preferring instead to stick with what he knew best. Besides, silver and blue matched his living room furniture.

The remote flashed a positive link, and the pattern of colors on Mark's screen coalesced into a solid field of pearl grey. Emblazoned across the top of the screen in large, stylized letters of deep indigo was a single word: JackBack. Beneath the logo, a tiny cartoon hoodlum skulked onscreen and proceeded to boost an equally tiny cartoon Mercedes, accompanied by the loping sax riffs of the old Pink Panther theme. The thief jimmied the door in record time, and was just about to drive his prize off the screen when a giant indigo hand snaked out from behind the JackBack logo. It snatched up the Mercedes, shook the little car until the thief fell out of the driver's side window, then mercilessly smashed the unfortunate little perp under a giant indigo fist.

Mark chuckled and pointed his remote at the bottom of the screen, where the menu bar read "Access Online Help."

The JackBack online customer service representative was a young woman with green eyes and a wispy flattop. The indigo bar scrolling across the bottom of Mark's screen informed him that he had reached Lee, and that it would be her pleasure to serve him today.

Mark stole a quick glance at his remote to ensure that his console was transmitting the default online interactive, an idealized, nattily-dressed realtime animation of Mark himself. After all, it wouldn't do to be seen in public lounging about the sofa in one's underwear.

"Thank you for calling JackBack. How may we help you..." Lee briefly dropped her eyes from the pickup lens to her own menu bar, "... Mr. Piro?"

"Hello. Don DeMicco, please."

Lee turned slightly offscreen to consult her database, and Mark noted that the motion did not perturb her flat, polite smile. She was real, though, Mark felt certain; a corporate interactive wouldn't have included the tiny flaws he noted in her appearance—a small chicken pox scar at the corner of her left eye, the slightly largish bump at the base of her neck where it met the shoulder. Those would have been edited out by the tech when they made her scan. Nice looking, Mark thought, despite the imperfections.

"Here we go," Lee faced the screen again. "If you'll hold for a sec, I'll transfer you to Don's extension."

Mark opened his mouth to say something droll and engaging, but Lee had put him in transfer mode before he could finish the first word. His joke was preempted by the vamping triangle solo of the Pink

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Panther's opening bars. The little thief on the JackBack main menu ignored Mark's retort, too intent on boosting the same little Mercedes. Mark pouted, willing the big indigo fist to reappear. Hell, he thought, she's probably married anyway.

"Hello, Mark Piro?" The main menu popped off the screen before the fist could complete its swing, replaced this time by the face of an apple-cheeked young man with thinning blond hair and a hundred-watt smile. "I'm Don DeMico."

"Nice to meet you, Don," Mark said. "I got your number from Ginger Merlet at Marietta Uzitsu . . ."

"Mm-hmm," DeMico was noncommittal, then brightened as recognition dawned. "Oh, Ginger! I spoke to her just last week. You got the new Sportif, right?"

"Right," Mark answered. "Sportif Excel."

"Ahh . . ." DeMico almost sang the word, nodding his head in approval. "That's the high-end model with the rear spoiler, right? Nice piece of machinery."

"Thanks," Mark couldn't help but be proud; the deluxe Excel package had set him back quite a sum. "Anyway, Ginger gave me your number—"

"To talk about a security system, right? Now how'd I know that?" DeMico laughed at his own joke, holding a finger up to the screen while he typed some commands into the desktop with his other hand. "You know, Mark, Ginger only gives my name out to her top-shelf customers. You must have really impressed her. There!" DeMico punched the 'Enter' key audibly, then turned back to the screen. His expression had grown serious.

Abruptly, Mark's screen faded to black.

That's the third time that black Camaro has changed lanes with me, Tyler thought.

His eyes flitted nervously between the rearview and the road ahead. The sun was already a deep amber disk more than half hidden by the horizon, and in the foreground expanse Tyler could see the broken shards of the old Atlanta skyline beginning to baste in a murky, healing dusk.

Ten miles.

Tyler cursed as the onboard sensors kicked on the Jag's headlights. The heads-up dimmed automatically, and the rearview LCD shifted its spectrum to accommodate the oncoming darkness.

The cell phone was still dead. Tyler cursed again, wishing he had listened to Diane and left the Jag home. Her Lexus was clunky and slow, but it wouldn't have attracted so much attention.

The Camaro changed lanes with him again. Three cars back.

The Gingrich merged onto Interstate 75 just below the Kennesaw Projects, and the highway blossomed to its full sixteen lanes. CommuteNet was inaccessible due to the Jag's wasted com system, so Tyler was left squinting at the horizon to get some idea of the traffic volume. Light, but thickening to the south.

Now or never, Tyler thought. He flipped on his *SpeedDaemon* to confuse the police motion sensors dotting the highway median, and juggled the Jaguar up to eighty-five.

"Warning! The posted speed limit is seventy-five miles per hour. Please—"

"Screw you!" Tyler yelled at the Jag's polite reminder, toggling off the VRU before it could repeat its automated warning.

The Camaro lost ground, unable to match the Jaguar's sudden acceleration. An old lady in a dusty red LeBaron jealously occluded the Camaro's only opening.

Tyler put some more distance between him and the Camaro, then merged right and cut off the *SpeedDaemon* so the police couldn't track the scrambler's source.

No Camaro in sight.

Too close, Tyler thought, trying to relax now that the danger was past. With a flip of his thumb on the wheel, he engaged the Jag's cruise control, watching idly as the onboard charted the quickest route to the Perimeter. The radio faded on as pre-programmed, and the Jaguar's interior reverberated with the jaunty backbeat of They Might Be Giants' *Uzi Ball and Chain*.

Oldies, Tyler thought bitterly. Diane must have left the damn radio on WXXK again. Seven miles.

The powder blue Uzitsu Sportif Excel limped slowly to the shoulder. When it came to rest, its driver, a well-dressed black man with grey hair, stepped out and around the rear bumper to inspect the damage done by the burgundy Cadillac rolling to a stop a few feet behind. A lanky young woman with a red crewcut stepped out of the Caddy to join the older man, as did her passenger, a darker young man in a bulky, oversized jacket.

"The average car owner has a one in three hundred chance of becoming a victim of theft over the course of a fifty-year driving career," Don DeMico recited from a small window in the lower right corner of Mark's display. "The day Marietta Uzitsu delivered your Sportif, Mark, your own chances of being carjacked jumped to an even one in a hundred."

The two youths approached the driver with arms outspread in apparent apology. The young woman began rooting through her rucksack, while her companion bent down to inspect the damage done to the Sportif's rear bumper.

"Sport coupes like yours are especially attractive to the carjacker, Mark—high resale value on the black market, relatively easy to break into, and lots of expensive components inside for the choppers to piece-meal. A big payday." DeMico leaned closer to his pickup lens. "You know what a fifteen year old gets for first offense grand theft auto, Mark? Intervention—three weeks in a private room at Crawford Long for counseling, then he's back on the block looking for a new ride. Three weeks. Second offenders get six."

The youth in the bulky jacket seized the driver in a clumsy bear hug, momentarily pinning the larger man's arms behind his back. The young woman pulled a Mace canister from her rucksack and sprayed, peppering the man's face as he struggled to get free.

The driver fell to his knees, shaking his head fitfully, pressing the heels of his hands into his eye sockets.

The second youth slammed his forearm downward, across the back of the driver's neck. The woman followed with a knee to the bridge of the man's nose.

The driver lay prone on the dusty shoulder, unmoving. He didn't flinch when they kicked him, so they kicked him again.

And again.

Finally, the young woman leaned over and grabbed a handful of the driver's hair. His neck was limp. The two carjackers hastily rifled through the man's pockets until they found his car key, then left him alone on the deserted highway. The young man returned to the Caddy, while his companion drove away in her new Sportif Excel.

The driver still didn't move.

"I'm sorry if that shocked you, Mark," DeMico's face once again filled the screen, apparently disgusted with what he had just

witnessed. "We picked that up last spring during a quarterly tracking test—every now and then we'll pick up sat signals from a competitor's system. It was real. We found out later that the driver didn't make it."

"Sad thing is, it didn't have to be that way."

The Camaro had resurfaced in Tyler's rearview, slicing through the thickening traffic near the Perimeter's edge with the grace of a crocodile in pursuit of an injured water bird.

Tyler struggled to stay on the highway, shocked as he was by the other car's sudden reappearance. He overcorrected, nearly sideswiping a Jeep in the neighboring lane, then stomped on the accelerator.

The Camaro followed, closely this time, no road hog LeBaron to hinder its pursuit.

Four miles.

The day was nearly gone now, but the pickup lens on Tyler's rear bumper still collected enough light for him to make out the faces of the Camaro's occupants in his rearview.

A young woman with a red buzz cut. A dark-skinned teenager in a bulky jacket and gang colors.

Gangbangers.

Tyler's hand slipped from the wheel. His bladder was full. He had seen footage of what happens when gangbangers boost a car.

Three miles.

Traffic had begun to congeal as it neared the Perimeter, Tyler's avenues of escape were closing. Speed would not save him this time, so he searched desperately for some break in the lanes to get the Camaro off his ass.

Two miles.

Tyler cut his wheel to the right. Hard.

So all you need to do is load our trackware into your car's CPU using your owner's PIN, and all the necessary modifications will be made automatically."

"You mean the JackBack software takes over my car's operating system?" Mark didn't like the sound of that. "What if I decide I don't want it six months down the road?"

"No problem. All our trackware does is place harmless code tags in each of the key files that run your car's operating system. We run a timed diagnostic on the coded files to make sure they haven't been tampered with or removed by someone with less than owner's access, then every so often your car dials up our system automatically to let us know it's still intact and under your control. That's how we track your car." DeMico smiled, then added as an afterthought, "Oh, and if you decide not to renew your contract with us, we just piggyback a command onto your last dial-up which kicks off the trackware's built-in uninstall routine. No more JackBack."

"I see," Mark said. He didn't, really, but he decided not to probe further for fear of appearing dense. "But if that's all there is to it, how come you guys charge so much?"

DeMico laughed. "Well, we are the premium auto theft protection and recovery service, Mark. Tell you what—why don't you let me explain a little bit about the security industry as a whole, and maybe I can answer your question that way.

"You'll notice that I called JackBack a service and not a system. That's because it's different. Unlike our competitors, we don't depend on a single, technology-driven system to manage our customer base. We use several technologies, and back them up with a full-time, round-the-clock staff. JackBack is a complete, integrated service. It does cost more, but you get what you pay for. Right?"

"New, let's compare that to our largest competitor, SkyEye. Their contract fee is about half what we charge, I think. Fact is, SkyEye uses only one tracking method, a tech-driven system called Isotecton Immersion or I-I. With I-I, your entire car is treated with a proprietary bond which generates a distinctive, harmless radioactive signature. SkyEye leases time and space on various weather and com satellites for their own onboard software, then uses that signature to monitor your car for the duration of your contract with them."

"What's wrong with that?" Mark asked.

"Nothing," DeMico shrugged. "As tech-driven systems go, I-I is a fairly reliable process. 'Course, it'll never stop a professional—he'll just track the satellites and boost your car during one of the closures in the orbit window. Some chop shop will strip your car for parts, and SkyEye will be chasing a million signatures where there used to be only one. If that happens, you're pretty much a pedestrian again, Mark."

"Well, I already knew about SkyEye," Mark said. "I'm actually leaning more toward something like NoJack."

"NoJack?" DeMico gave Mark an incredulous look. "Mark, do yourself a favor and stay away from that racket. NoJack uses frame tagging, a hidden radio transmitter on the frame. These days, frame tagging is about as effective as putting a picture of a big dog in your car window. Any kid with twenty bucks and access to a Radio Shack can find that transmitter and scrag it inside of four seconds."

"Yeah, but they still guarantee the return of my car if it is stolen." Mark had done his homework; retrieval stats were important in choosing a good security system.

"Very true," DeMico seemed to back off a little, steeping his hands under his chin. "But you might want to look at what NoJack means by the word vehicle in contractual terms.

"NoJack's lifetime guarantee defines vehicle as your engine and your frame. In other words, the engine and the frame are the only parts of your car that NoJack is contractually bound to recover or replace if your car gets stolen. I'll tell you right now, there's only one company that's going to give you the guarantee you're looking for—"

"Right. JackBack."

"Absolutely!" DeMico slapped his palm flat on the desktop. "Mark, are you familiar with the JackBack Guarantee?"

Night had fallen, fully and with a certainty Tyler could no longer deny. He anxiously searched his rearview for signs of the Camaro.

Nothing.

The hairpin turn Tyler had negotiated off the highway at the Windy Hill exit had sent the Camaro spinning wildly onto the far shoulder. The Chevy Camaro had been a sports car in name only for years; it could still match him speed for speed on the open road, but it was no



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match for the Jag's suspension. Tyler hadn't looked back to see if the other car had actually flipped over, but he felt certain that it hadn't exited behind him.

Four miles.

With the Camaro gone, Tyler instructed the Jag's onboard to recalculate the quickest route to the Perimeter. He was heading south on Georgia Highway 41, so the West Paces entrance would be th—

An oncoming blur straddled the double yellow line as it tore past. Tyler hugged the right shoulder to keep from being clipped. He glanced into the rear view. His stomach heaved.

The Camaro wheeled around in a sloppy, screeching U-turn.

Tyler downshifted and stomped hard on the accelerator. The Jaguar shot forward, its tires smoking against the asphalt before they bit.

They jumped ahead one exit and doubled back, Tyler thought. He shifted his grip on the steering wheel, drying first one hand then the other on the front of his pants.

Three miles.

The Camaro grew in the rear view, closing the gap.

The Jag's heads-up read ninety, but Tyler continued to press his foot into the accelerator. It was an all out drag race to the Perimeter now; prudence was pointless.

Two miles.

The Jag hit ninety-five on the straightaway; he was almost home. Tyler leaned forward in his seat, his posture not unlike that of a marathon runner sprinting for the tape. He never saw the police cruiser parked silently in the shadows of the shoulder.

So, let me get this straight," Mark asked, "If my car is stolen, JackBack promises to have it back to me within seventy-two hours? In perfect condition?"

"Let me repeat it for you, Mark. The JackBack Guarantee clearly states that we will have the stolen vehicle in your possession, in the same condition as when it was stolen or better, within seventy-two hours." DeMicco leaned closer to the screen once more. "This is our business, Mark—we make money at it. In the eight years JackBack has been doing this, do you know how many cars we've been unable to recover?" He paused a beat, then hoisted his right index finger, "One."

"And what happened there?"

"We couldn't meet the conditions of the contract, so we bought the lady a brand new Cadillac." DeMicco folded his hands, "Those are the terms of the 'JackBack Guarantee.' If we can't come up with the stolen car, we'll buy you a new one."

"Well, it does sound good . . ." Mark considered a moment, absently fiddling with the remote. It was a lot of money. Then again, so was the car. "Don, if you can put that guarantee in writing, I think you might have yourself a deal."

"No problem. One second . . ." DeMicco returned to his desktop, punched in a few commands, then hit the Enter key with an audible pop. There you go. I've uploaded you a copy of our six-month term contract. Look it over, and if everything is agreeable to you, all you have to do is stamp it with your signature." The wide smile returned as DeMicco patiently awaited Mark's decision.

The flashing lights of the police cruiser illuminated the Jag's interior in quick spurts of blue and white. Tyler reached across to the glove compartment for his license and proof of insurance.

The Camaro had fallen way back, finally disappearing onto a side street to avoid confrontation with the Georgia State Patrol.

It was over.

Tyler waited in silence, laughing softly at the irony that his salvation should come in the form of a speeding ticket. The driver's window squeaked slightly as he rolled it down to greet the approaching officer.

"Man, am I glad to see you!"

Mark, I think you've made the right decision." Dawn DeMicco beamed a grin into her pickup lens, which cued her online interactive to mimic the gesture across the link. Demographic studies indicated that male consumers respond more favorably to male salespersons in the security industry, so Dawn had become Don for Mark Piro. "I've got your signed contract here, and I'm uploading you a presentation copy for your records along with some instructions on how to dial in and install our trackware on your car's system. Give us a ring if you have any problems, okay?"

"Okay," Mark answered, his smile gleaming from Dawn's display in artificial unison with the sparkling gold pin on his lapel. "Thanks for your help, Don."

"Hey, thank you!" Dawn shot back with a double-edged grin, "And keep that Sportif under a hundred, y'hear? Bye now!"

Dawn keyed the link off with an enthusiastic pinch of her right index finger, simultaneously leaning back to ease the strain on her tired muscles.

Another happy customer.

She added the last details of the new account to her online database, then keyed a link to the internal com system.

"Sandra, this is Dawn. I just sent a new account up on a guy named Mark Piro. Can you check and see if the packet made it to you intact?"

"Sure," answered Sandra's voice behind the shimmering transporter effect of Dawn's wait screen. "Yeah, it's here. Oh, and Frank Fishman just called in for you. Do you want me to put him through?"

"Yeah, go ahead," Dawn answered absently, already back to her desktop for some last minute work before the short drive home. The positive external link chimed once from Dawn's screen, and she answered it without looking up. "Hi, Frank. What can I do for you?"

"You said you wanted a call when we picked up the Jaguar," Frank said. "We got it—no damage."

"Pristine? Frank, that's great! How d—!" Dawn stopped short, noticing as she looked up that Frank's pitted pink features were shadowed by the brim of a wide Smokey Bear hat. "Ah ha! Well done, Frank. You're a genius."

"Nah, we just got lucky this time," Frank explained, looking slightly embarrassed at Dawn's thick praise. "When Underwood took that service call on his cell phone yesterday, I had Sandra phone some code into his trackware to disable his outgoing. Rusty and Paolo chased him around a bit while we waited, and *voilà*—all me and Amos had to do was sit there till the kids pushed him our way."

"Well, good job anyway," she said, pausing her desktop work to face the screen. "Now, I need you to get the Jag over to Manny ASAP. The Werner guarantee comes due tomorrow at four, so I'd like to see that Jaguar in Dr. Werner's garage no later than three-thirty. I've just sent Manny the specs on the Werner account's serial numbers, colors, and mileage. All you have to do is drop the car off."

JackBack

"Will do," Frank answered. "We're gonna stash the phony cop rig first, though. Too many real badges on the road tonight to risk the Interstate."

"Fine," Dawn nodded absently, returning to her keyboard. The last details of the Werner recovery were quickly entered, and Dawn sealed the file with a final pop of the Enter key. She paused momentarily as the database completed its update routine, then turned back to the pickup lens with an unreadable expression on her round face. "By the way, Frank, how's the owner?"

"Who? Underwood?" Frank cleared his throat and looked offscreen, shook his head in apparent disgust. "The idiot tried to duke it out with me at the last minute—Arnos had to cut him. He'll live, though. There's enough traffic on 41 tonight for somebody to drive and pick him up. Either way, it'll look just like a gangbang. We're cool."

"I see. Well, just to be safe, go ahead and place an anonymous 911 call to have him picked up." Dawn keyed another command into her desktop, and nodded triumphantly a few seconds later as a new set of specs scrolled silently across the infobar at the bottom of her datascreen. "Underwood's still within the 90-day grace period to reinstate his account with us. Tell you what—find out what hospital they take him to and send up a nice bouquet later in the week with our sympathies. Oh, and don't forget to throw in one of my cards, okay?"



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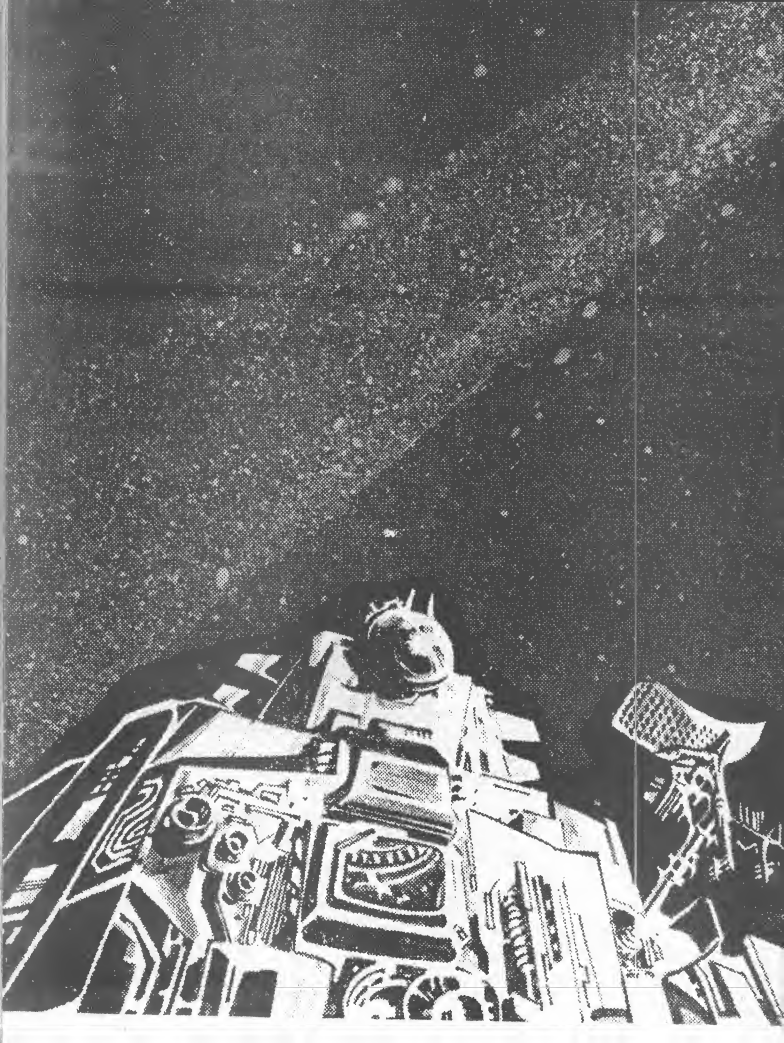
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T. Jackson King's work has appeared in *Analogue*, *Tomorrow*, and *Pulphouse*. His first novel, *Retread Shop*, was a Warner novel; his second, *Ancestor's World*, from Ace, is set in A. C. Crispin's Starbridge universe.

Paladin

by T. Jackson King

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A lost love is like a spent shell—merely the ghost of something once powerful. Why, then, did her memory still haunt him? She was dead, and there was nothing to be done about it. Nothing at all.

Matt Dragoncaux shrugged inside his armored combat suit. It was real. It was no ghost. And it was powerful. But it felt like a womb enfolding something yet unformed. Something powerful in its own right, yet only a pale irritation of what he had once had—with her. Until their starship was hulled and she died in front of him. He shuddered.

Work. That's what he needed. That's why he still sat in a third-rate dive like *Wiggles*, stuck away in a useless corner of a backwater space station, waiting for his appointment with a possible Patron... and she was late.

For a Vigilante, hanging around one place too long isn't smart. You can get killed, staying in place. The code of a Vigilante is simple: track 'em, strike 'em, and be elsewhere when the Anarchate battlecruisers showed up.

Matt squinted into the clinging shadows of *Wiggles*, searching for the alien woman who'd answered his Job Board listing. It had been brief enough: *Vigilante, for Hire: Have Ship. Will Travel*. He smiled, recalling the ancient vidpic from which he'd stolen the words. He'd always liked Paladin. Their features were similar. But the man had lived in a simpler time. A time when little Earth had thought itself the center of the universe.

For the thousandth time he wished humans weren't spread so thinly across a galaxy infested by thousands of alien species, with no justice, no law, and a soul-destroying culture called the Anarchate. Why did he live when whole species sometimes died in the far reaches of space? What could he do, a lone human, against a cultural system already ancient when Mars lost its atmosphere? But wishing doesn't change reality—such as the fact that Earth had been 'found' by alien genome slavers in A.D. 2020, and had never been the same since. Nor had he, since Helen's death. Matt yearned for her touch, her kiss, her warm embrace, the smell of her hair, the feel of... He pushed the memory pain away. But once again, he felt exposed. Vulnerable. Weak.

Where the hell was she?

Briefly, he considered leaving his private alcove, set against a back wall and far from either entrance to the dive. The Patron was late. Long minutes late. Maybe she'd sold his location to the competition, to the local Anarchate commander, or just taken a buyoff from a genome slaver. A walking slab of human protein carries the seeds of many cloneslaves—if you can catch him, of course. Matt grinned starkly.

He was hard to catch.

Cyborgs usually are.

But Helen would not have approved of what he now did. Or how he'd changed. Nor would she have understood the compromises he'd

made just to survive. He was no longer the simple soyfarm boy from a Third Wave colony planet who'd fallen in love with a high stakes baccarat dealer—a woman whose service contract was owned by unusually possessive aliens. They'd escaped on a decrepit, second-rate freighter, putting half a galaxy between them and her owners. For awhile, it worked. They looked forward to a better life, far beyond the colonized stars of the Sixth Wave. Far out. So far out no aliens had ever heard of Humans. So far out he wondered, at the time, if they'd end up on the other side of The Dark, in Perseus Arm.

Death came like a thief in the night. First, the freighter's singularity drive overloaded. Then, as they lay becalmed between the stars, local resource-pirates attacked with kinetic kill projectiles. She'd been standing in the wrong place at the wrong time, her hand reaching out to him as they sought escape in a lifepod. *Think*. So suddenly. So simply. The image hit before the sound pierced his ears. The image of her head exploding as the KKP tore past the outer hull plates and through her, tossing gibbets of flesh and brain every which way, spattering the walls. Then came the fury. The madness. The retreat in the lifepod. He'd drifted in stasis for eons, it seemed, surfing through the rasping molecular dust of a nearby nebula. Until he'd been found, at last, by the self-aware alien starship he called *Vigilante*, but which called itself something far different. *Vigilante* the Dreadnought had chosen to Free-Associate with him. Machine to flesh, two had become as one.

Matt shivered inside his combat rig, glad for the touch of Suit; his umbilical cord—of sorts—to *Vigilante*. Suit held him upright. Suit supported him. And only Suit could be counted on. Especially when you're a Vigilante.

Who hunted prey...

With the thought came a whir from Suit's systems as his increased adrenaline and heart rate alerted Suit's onboard Tactical computer to a potential Threat situation. Its processing unit went into a tizzy trying to Lock-On, Classify, and present Options, be they Localized Decimation, Generic Lifeform Extinction, or a Needs Help alarm to *Vigilante*, now docked nose-in on the other side of Trade station Hagonar. Too far away to be of help, *Vigilante* floated at reduced Alert, at one with the station and a dozen other starships, as all followed a leisurely orbit around the double star system Theta Auriga B. It lay only 110 light years from Sol. Not far, really. Unless you counted memory distance. Inside Suit, lights flashed, demanding his personal attention.

Green datastreams flickered and scrolled by on the inside of his helmet faceplate. Nanoware subsystems reported local environmental data, alien classifications, weapons systems carried by those aliens, the infrared and far infrared emissions of warm-blooded beings, the microwave emissions from eyeless aliens, and similar absurdities. Matt blinked, shutting off the overwhelming datafeed from a remorseless, armored, nuclear-powered combat suit. Denial did no good. His fingers twitched within their gloves, moving to random

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electrical pulses as Suit did a biosystems check-out on him. It was confirming that the human component of the fighting unit known to its Mitsubishi-Toshiba makers as Cyborg Attack/Defense Model XXIII *Alph* was still in peak operating condition. He snorted. Uppity computers! His mind controlled Suit—not some damned algorithm cooped up in the AI labs of Kyoto.

Still, he might as well make use of obsolete human systems. With a slower blink of his right eye, Matt twiggled the helmet's electro-optical sensors, and raised his faceplate. The heavy odors of *Wiggles* entered. He wrinkled his nose.

It stank. The air reeked of alien pheromones, rancid garbage, metal-scouring cleansers, disinfectants, and the acid fumes from seven types of tobacco-analogues. *Taste*. The metallic bitterness of recycled air coated his tongue, telling him the dive's titanium recycling filters hadn't been cleaned in a long time. Next came *sound*. Screeching, squalling, heterodyning sounds filled *Wiggles*, as might be expected at a disreputable bar/restaurant/pleasure dive in the CHON section of Hagonar. Matt winced, wishing he could shut his ears as easily as his mouth. Where the hell was that Patron? He looked around.

His neighbors were supposedly other lifeforms constructed of carbon, hydrogen, oxygen and nitrogen, who radiated at a moderate temperature and breathed the foul gas called oxygen. However, he counted four cannister tanks encrusted with milky-white ice—it seemed the methane breathers were slumming tonight. But even stranger beings toured *Wiggles*. Just beyond his alcove's Privacy Curtain field, there glimmered the iridescent blue crystals of a barium titanate alien; its piezoelectric crystals fluxed and changed visibly, engaging in thought. In the middle distance, shapes moved about the wide, amphitheater-like room, its domed ceiling festooned with parallel bars for the avian and forest-evolved types. Distantly, among the shadows of the far side, there moved a humanoid form, one vaguely reminiscent of a woman. His Patron? Maybe. Maybe not. Perhaps only an hallucination.

Matt could see too much.

He could hear too much.

He could smell far too much.

And he felt horribly alone. It all overloaded his mind. Just as he'd felt overloaded ever since docking at Hagonar, hoping for a Hire by a Patron-who was late. Not good. Especially not when he sat exposed in a bar like *Wiggles*, unable to avoid intimate contact with... with everything.

Subsonics frazzled his nerves as his body vibed to speech patterns that relied on deep bass sounds. Heat and freezing cold slapped his face, alternating as aliens with cooling systems or heating units passed within mere yards. Things with too many eyes, weird-colored skin, insect-like exoskeletons, and others even more baroque eddied and swirled before him—dancing, talking, making deals, arranging for assassinations, offering weapons of mass destruction, trading in the illegal drugs of twenty star systems, or passing around small white vials containing genetically engineered cloneslave fetuses from who knew how many species.

Just a normal Trade day in the Anarchate.

The humanoid form that looked like a woman moved towards his private alcove, still twenty meters away. Ummm. Not a hallucination. But no way another human—not out here.

Time to go to work.

Matt blinked to lower the faceplate, switched to Eyes-Up mode, and then activated the virtual-reality display. *Wiggles* took form inside his helmet, a miniature room relegated to the faceplate's right

quadrant. He studied the room's layout, the placement of lifeforms, energy sources, motion vectors—all in three dimensions that rotated within a miniature graphics display. A great thing, the display. It could place him in point-of-view at the ceiling, at either entrance to *Wiggles*, or in his own alcove. He switched focus to the faceplate's left side as new data shimmered into being. A downlink from *Vigilante* glowed like a red cloud. Within that cloud floated Hagonar Station, nearby ships, their classifications and weaponry ratings, unpowered asteroidal debris, gamma and beta radiation levels, solar wind fluxes from Theta Auriga's two stars, and a thousand other details. Too many details. But the flood had just begun. Matt went to gestalt focus, simultaneously seeing the faceplate holos and the inner surfaces of his contact lenses. On those lenses flickered readouts from the twelve weapons systems of Suit. All showed green-light Ready status. Then, filled with an unnameable ecstasy, existing both within and outside Suit, he surrendered his will and underwent systems checkout.

Thousand megawatt laser pulse-cannons stirred to life on either shoulder, tracking around the room, seeking Lock-On. A *thump-crump* sounded from each bicep as ten rounds of High Explosive Discarding Sabot shells cycled into miniature rocket-guns; they made his biceps look like a bagpipes factory. On his chest, the pulse-doppler radar whined on. Millimeter-wavelength pulses ranged out over the room, probing the inner composition of those lifeforms not wearing a stealth or radar-reflective body covering. Hard against his spine, the rocket launcher backpack grumbled down to Standby, told by Suit's CPU the range was too close for a subkiloton atomic. But on either hip, and snugged up against his belly, backup magnetohydrodynamic power units pulsed to life. *We are ready!* they screamed, sounding like little electron bees. They stood ready to feed surge-power to the lasers and to Suit's adaptive-optics outer skin—just in case a stray laser beam came his way. Other weapons systems flashed by, also powered on. Fingertip lasers. Pressor beams. Tractors. Nerve gas dispensers. *Now? Can we go now?* God, they were so eager. Almost humanly eager. Then the ecstasy eased off. Checkout done, a new display flickered onto his central faceplate, devoted solely to the approaching female humanoid.

Now just fifteen meters away.

Matt dropped gestalt and focused on the faceplate. Bio sensors displayed clearly her skeletal structure. A subsidiary readout confirmed it as calcium-based, but with a titanium upgrade for strength. Infrared showed a body temp ten degrees above human-normal. Pulse-doppler revealed a double-heart that beat arrhythmically; that was a bioupgrade for a High Threat environment. Gas spectrometers documented the exact amount of carbon dioxide she exhaled. The heat-map glowed with thermal concentrations—at her head, both breasts, each heart, her hands, the groin, and her feet. Mech sensors showed she carried only a laser handgun, riding in a holster on her right hip. A machete-knife rode on her left hip. Her environment suit showed up as a vacuum-resistant monomolecular film, its oxygen reservoirs presumably strapped onto the woman's back, buttocks or rear legs—and thus out of direct line-of-sight.

Ten meters.

A black-suited woman moved toward him, her long hair fluttering slowly in the low-g environment of *Wiggles*. Her arms swung casually at her side. Her eyes—her needful eyes: were fixed on him.

Eight meters.

A serious look filled her shadowed face. Her head canted forward a bit, implying determination. A human woman approached.

Six meters.

Paladin

Was she really Human? Or... was she an alien-constructed clone put together from stolen or bartered human cells, mind-programmed, emotionally neutered, and devoted solely to the Master who would periodically reward her pain-pleasure center with sadistic lashes from a neurowhip?

Perhaps she was the cyborg vessel of a self-aware, silicon-germanium supercomputer from a far star system, who figured it needed an organic form while slumming among organics.

Or perhaps she was just a mindless biological Remote filled with plague spores, built according to a convenient bipedal form, and programmed to seek out and infect carbon-based lifeforms similar to the original genome pattern.

Such things existed in the ruthless galaxy-culture known as the Anarchate. The options for Hunter-Killer weapons systems are not limited to the electronic, photonic and inorganic.

Four meters.

She slowed, blinking long eyelashes. She spoke. "Are you Matt Dragoneaux, Human, Work Sigil-Vigilante?"

His comlink translated a weird language full of polytonal phonemes. Ancient Greek.

Three meters.

"Stop!"

She stopped, swaying slightly in the four-tenths gee-field of Wiggles. Bare hands stayed at her side. His displays keened with Threat Readiness signals. Suit hungered.

Matt blinked. Suit *Locked-On* one laser pulse-cannon, centering it between her eyes. They were green—as nearly as he could see in flickering alien light. Her hair glimmered with an ebony luster. And her skin shone alabaster white—where it showed outside of her cinder dark vacsuit.

"You're late. Identify yourself."

She looked irritated. His faceplate display tracked an increase in double-heart pulse rates. Carbon dioxide exhalations increased slightly. Muscle tension changed a bit. Cheek muscles tightened. Minor facial tics showed on her right jaw. Under the vacsuit, full breasts rose and fell regularly, not yet showing the rapid breathing of worry-threat-danger.

"I am Eliana Antigone Themistocles, Derind/Human genetic mix, Sigma Puppiis star system, planet Halcyon—a Third Wave colony. My Work Sigil is Molecular Geneticist." She frowned. "And I'm not late!"

Ahhh—a Derind/Human crossbreed! That explained the white skin, but what was her purpose? And would she, like everyone else he'd met, lie to him? "Turn around."

She looked confused, then exasperated, finally resigned. "If you insist." She turned, presenting her back to him.

Each shoulder blade was covered by a cylindrical lump. Lower down, and just above the vacsuit-covered buttocks, lay a coiled bulge. Was it the vestigial tail of the Derind aboreal dwellers? Either that, or a clever imitation to fit a totally false story. Matt double-blinked and took a Threat assessment of her back. Faceplate's Eyes-Up display changed. The right quadrant showed only small, pressurized oxygen canisters riding over her shoulder blades, a heat signature denoting both hearts and the groin, and no weapons other than the laser handgun and machete-knife. Curious. She was remarkably under-weaponed for a place like Hagonar Station. Did she have capabilities unknown to him? Or was she an innocent abroad, unaware of the dangers at Hagonar? And the risk she'd exposed him to by being late.

"Face me, please."

Storm clouds gathered in her eyes as she finished pirouetting. "I, I—"

"Do not touch your weapons, Themistocles-person."

"What!" Her mouth gaped. A vein on her forehead pulsed angrily.

"You, you—"

"Yes?"

"You clone!" Anger made her beautiful—too beautiful. "How dare you speak to me as if I were only a cipher!"

Matt's bicep rocket-guns locked onto her mid-body, activated by her voice Threat tones. Both shoulder lasers now aimed between her eyes, their pinhead sighting lasers putting green dots between black eyebrows. Damn. That's the trouble with staying in neurolink with one's weapons system's—integration with them becomes second nature, like breathing, sleeping, eating... and fighting.

She was definitely a naïf. Naïve to a fault. Hopefully not stupid; Matt sighed. "Lower your voice, please. My Suit systems detect Threat."

Her jaw muscles jumped again. Eliana Themistocles eyed the rocket-guns and lasers bristling from her mid-body on a cactus. If she even remembered what a cactus was. *Had been*, once-long ago. Before the deserts were flooded to grow rice for too many people. "Can you talk?" she asked, attempting sarcasm. "Or do you only sit on that bench like an overweight Bal-lizard, too brainless to do more than posture Threat at anything that comes within your sensory zone?"

"I talk." Her tone declared her a small frog from a smaller pond who thought herself important. In the Anarchate, of all places. Maybe not stupid, maybe she was just provincial and parochial. Matt focused on Suit. All readouts confirmed Themistocles as a Derind/Human crossbreed: sex, female; age, about thirty Sol-years; and with no sign of malnutrition or iron-deficiency diseases. Food must be plentiful on her planet. "Your purpose?"

Eliana started forward. "I am—"

"Stop!"

Matt overrode Suit's Fire-command to a bicep shell as she reached two meters range, just beyond the alcove's flat metal table. Eliana Themistocles' stark white face tightened over high, aristocratic cheekbones. She seemed frightened now, staring morbidly at Suit as its external subsystems flashed brightly. Like a deadly peacock.

"Don't do that again," Matt said through the helmet's external mike. He controlled the sound level—no need to vibrate her bones. "State your purpose."

Shivering, the Patron focused those needful green eyes on him. "Hey—we had an appointment, didn't we?" He said nothing, just watched; her air of authority wilted a bit. "I—my Clan family that is—we're looking for a Vigilante. You were listed on the Job Board. So I messaged you."

"Your problem?"

Eliana scowled. "An off-world alien Trade conglomerate is breaking the terms of a mining agreement that we and our Derind Nest-mates signed with them." She paused, then licked her lips. "May I sit?"

"No." Around them, other aliens were taking notice of two humanoids in the same room—an unusual circumstance considering the rarity of the bipedal lifeform. Matt did not enjoy being the focus of someone else's attention. Nor staying in one place so long. But a Job... He extruded a gauntlet knife-claw and touched a pressure stud on the table, then looked back to Eliana.

Absolute Magnitude

"Come inside the Privacy Curtain field, but stay at least one meter away."

"What?" Eliana looked puzzled, then astonished as the Curtain turned opaque in front of her. The Curtain, being a one-way transmitter of photons, allowed Matt to see her. She shrugged, then stepped through the Curtain's electromagnetic field and halted on the other side of the table, standing still with both arms at her side. Sweat showed on the inside of her palms. But Suit's Threat systems keened loudly, unhappy with such an intrusion. He slapped his chest control panel, hitting the correct pressure stud the first time—as always. "Shut up!"

Eliana's expression stiffened. "Are you speaking to me?"

"No!" The keening died away as Matt reset the size of Suit's Threat zone. "Just this damned Suit! It doesn't like closeness—too threatening."

Still standing, Eliana smiled thinly. "And you? Do you dislike closeness with other sapients? Is that why you're outfitted like a miniature battleship?"

Matt braced his gauntleted hands against the tabletop, as if he could push away the memories. *Did he fear closeness? After Helen? Hey—he could be close! What other human could claim the unique meeting of the minds shared between him and the self-aware entity that was starship Vigilante? A symbiosis they were, quite rare in the records of space-faring peoples. But sometimes, very rarely, an organic could bond with an inorganic, in symbiosis, and know a life too strange for words. The two of them roamed a galaxy where the only purpose was survival. He looked up.*

"None of your business, Eliana Antigone Themistocles." From her eyes, pity came. Then she stared at him with a different look, using those little girl eyes on him. Eyes that touched him, made him feel... made him wish... "Explain your Purpose further."

Eliana blinked, seeming to abandon deeper thoughts. "As I said, we seek a Vigilante. The Trade group has employed a strip-miner the size of this station to rip out our minerals—all contrary to the contract. When our people approach, they are killed. We have few ships. And the MotherShip of the Trade conglomerate refuses entrance to our envoys. Our only alternative is destruction of the MotherShip or the Stripper."

"The group's name?"

She looked rueful, ivory teeth biting her lower lip. "The Halicene Conglomerate."

Shit! Matt cared little who he fought, and only a little more did he care of who he helped. A Job was a job. He and Vigilante seemed well-suited to fighting hopeless causes, righting wrongs, helping the weak, and in general getting in the way of sensible evolutionary survival. Kill or be killed. Be smart or be dead. Be alert or be enslaved. The rules of natural selection worked at the galactic level too, in addition to planetary ecosystems. But it gave him some purpose, fighting lost causes. However, fighting the Halicene Conglomerate was stupid. Plain stupid.

"The Halicene Conglomerate controls half of Orion Arm. How could you people have been so *stupid* as to hire them?"

"Bastard!" Eliana trembled with fury. "No one else would give us *credit*! We needed full spectrum neonatal placental units for our crossbred zygotes—so we could bring them to full-term." Tears flickered like uncut diamonds. "The survival of the colony was at stake."

Matt blinked his eyes, feeling very weary, yet secure in the knowledge Suit would alert him to any Threat. What to do?

He needed a Patron. But not a credit-poor Patron. And not one so incredibly naive. He needed a Cause, but not one equivalent to walking into a plasma torch. But he was tired of hanging around Hagonar Station, a distinctive target for any genome slaver willing to take a chance on harvesting his DNA for sale to the highest bidder. So far, he'd fought off two back-hallway attacks, leaving behind smoking piles of protein and chitin-shell. Still... Matt opened his eyes.

"Eliana, I wish I could help you but—"

"Vreec!" Subsonic klaxons and pulsing red lights filled his Eyes-Up display. A Threat!

Movement.

Against the far wall of Wiggles, something moved. Something like a giant praying mantis insect, but loaded down with body armor, tubular weapons, and a glass-globe helmet set atop a toothy head that sported too many eyes. This *something* had just lumbered upright. Its own pulse-doppler radar now ranged his above, penetrating the Privacy Curtain like tissue-paper. A laser rangefinder sought entry past the Curtain, defeated only because of its coherent photons. Options scrolled across Matt's faceplate.

Eliana leaned forward, her look anxious. "Dragoneaux, will you—"

"Drop!"

She dropped under the table.

In sync and on-line with a super-strong combat suit that feels like your own body is wonderful. It's ecstatic. And so very dangerous to one's opponents.

Matt stood up so quickly his armor bent the table's edge. Nullgrav plates in his boots shot him up towards the ceiling. Both shoulder pulse-cannons whirled on Target. Picososeconds blurred past. Nanoseconds zipped along. Milliseconds tickled by, slowly.

Forty milliseconds.

Mr. Threat reared backwards, squawling something, a mid-body chitin-arm lifting a neurolinked tube towards Matt.

Two hundred milliseconds.

He blinked rapidly in a coded series.

Six hundred.

Green light flared. One of his laser pulse-cannons sliced through Mr. Threat's head and mid-body thorax, unleashing a dark ichor. The other sliced off the weapon-arm.

Nine hundred milliseconds.

"KABLAMMM!" Three HEDS rocket shells stitched the lower carapace of Mr. Threat.

One second.

A pressor beam speared out from the top of Matt's helmet, pushing the alien against the back wall.

One and a quarter seconds.

Matt stopped rising and hovered just below the ceiling.

A tractor beam tore at Mr. Threat's extremities, pulling off legs and multi-arms like a school kid might dissect a fly.

Two seconds.

A volley of Fire-and-Forget Nanoshells arced across the room, already programmed for the infrared signature of Mr. Threat, each shell able to twist and turn in flight as miniature rocket motors and vernier jets steered them after every dying twitch and jerk. They would follow any programmed Target around corners, over hills, into tunnels, and even under the ocean—for many kilometers. They were relentless. They were deadly. And they usually got their prey before their high-acceleration chemical fuel sputtered out.

Three seconds.

Light. Sound. Smell. Confusion.

They all filled *Wiggles'* gloomy shadows as other aliens dove under furniture, excited rapidly, put their own combat exoskeletons on Alert, or simply watched from behind the stone bar.

Suit lowered him back down to his private alcove as Mr. Threat's chitin-skin erupted with miniature nano-borers, carried by the Nanoshells, that systematically bored through its body like drillbits through wood. Poisons specific to most carbon-based lifeforms also poured out, overloading a dying multiple-heart system. Electronic white noise overwhelmed Mr. Threat's own combat exoskeleton programming—using miniature emitters carried by the Nanoshells—thus diverting any attempt by its Tactical programming to carry out preprogrammed offensive actions despite the death of its organic host. Finally, with a flare of actinic red light, the organic shell of Mr. Threat imploded in on itself as the nanoware energy-seekers made contact with the alien suit's power sources and overloaded them, burning up hardware systems and their organic host at the same time. Just as his boots touched the alcove floor, his onboard CPU displayed the factory-type and model of Mr. Threat's combat exoskeleton. *Halicene Conglomerate. Thix-model. Level Three Enforcer. Damn!*

Matt ripped the table aside, looking down at a very frightened Eliana. "We're safe—for the moment." She stood up shakily, then looked out into the bar at the piles of red-gleaming debris that had once been a living being. "Did anyone from Halcyon or Sigma Puppis know you were coming here?"

Eliana looked at him as if he were braindead. "Of course! Half the colony knew we needed a Vigilante."

"Great. Just great." Matt looked around *Wiggles*; the divemaster was already replacing broken glassware as a clean-bot sucked in the remains of his recent antagonist. Still, the air felt heavy, oppressive. He'd been here, in one place, far too long. Long enough, at least, for Mr. Threat to track him down. Thanks to Eliana. It was definitely time to get back on board *Vigilante*. He turned to her.

Eliana Themistocles seemed to be who and what she stated. Her problem was only too familiar to him. The plight of her world was critical—unconstrained strip mining of even part of the planet's crust would poison its rivers and lakes with heavy metals for centuries, perhaps critically unbalancing its ecosystem and throwing the whole lifeworld into ecoshock. Either *Halicene Conglomerate* had to leave, or the colony must leave. The two could not co-exist. At last, a real job. He sighed. Maybe he had genes for stupidity—or lost causes.

"Patron, that was an Enforcer for *Halicene Conglomerate*. Do your people worry them enough to send an assassin after you?"

Eliana's pale face froze. She stammered. "Uh, uh, yes—maybe, I don't know!" Frustration creased her young woman's face, still unlined by scars, dead hopes and lost loves. "But on the passenger freighter I took to get here, I used standard Screening techniques."

"What line?"

"Agon-Thet."

Matt considered. That was not a starline owned by *Halicene Conglomerate*, so far as he knew. Black intelligence was expensive, especially when it came to knowledge of the regional heavies. But Suit had its own expert Intelligence systems able to sift and sort through a thousand rumors, and *Vigilante's* databanks could never be filled. What else they contained he had no idea—except that *Vigilante* had never been *unable* to answer his questions . . . given enough time.

Perhaps only the ship captain had been bought—not the entire starline. He eyed Eliana.

"What payment do you offer?"

Her face brightened. "You'll help us?"

"Depends. I work for pay—not free. Your assets?"

She frowned, appearing disappointed. "What barter currency do you accept?"

Time. Too much time spent in one place. "I *refuse* payment in clones, brainpacs, drugs, plague viruses, and psychosis-inducing software. I *accept* unique gems, deuterium oxide fuel, germanium integrated circuits, molecular memory crystals, expert system algorithms, designer proteins, polytonal music, gold, rare earths, and hand-made art objects. Quickly!"

Eliana smiled softly. "An ethical Vigilante. How interesting." She sobered. "We can offer raw germanium, molecular memory crystals, unique biologicals based on alkaloid antivirals, and direct genetic manipulation waldo machinery. Satisfactory?"

From the far side of *Wiggles*, the divemaster watched Matt's private alcove a bit too intently—as best he could tell from the slant of the alien's podyeyes. Matt blinked once, alerting *Vigilante* that he was returning, and with a guest.

"That is satisfactory, Patron Themistocles," she said sourly. "Now, let's get the hell out of here. Two humanoids together always draw a crowd."

"Which way?" she said, looking around confusedly, still upset by the combat.

"Out! Out of here," he said, waving for her to lead the way. "Move it."

Eliana scowled, her look a promise that she would surely unload on him her opinion of such abrupt behavior, and far sooner than he wished. But she turned and headed out the main entrance of *Wiggles*. Matt stumped out after her, entering into a main arterial hallway, with Suit on full Alert status. No one bothered them as they headed for Dock Seven, and *Vigilante*.

Watching Eliana's buttocks move underneath the fabric of her vacsuit reminded him how long it had been since he'd made love to a woman. Virtual reality graphics, memories of Helen, and a few faded pictures were not enough. Not nearly enough. He needed more. But without the closeness. Too much closeness hurt. Too much caring hurt.

So fate had taught him.

He had a job to do. Only a job. Then he would move on.

But Matt could not escape a nagging question, something provoked by Eliana's earlier comment.

Did Suit *only* protect him—or did it really do more? Did it . . . did it offer him a convenient shield against his emotions, his loss, and his need for someone to care for him? Could Eliana be that someone?

Never!

She was just a human-alien hybrid. They had *nothing* in common. Nothing at all.

Matt Dragoneaux stumped along the hallway at one with Suit, a cyborg once more alone . . . except for a whispering voice in the back of his mind, a voice that said—"Even a Vigilante can find love."

Maybe.

But first they had to survive.



A. C. Crispin is very involved with SFWA and helping new writers. She has written a number of media tie-in books and is the creator of the Starbridge series.

A. C. Crispin: An Interview

by Pam Meek

AM: What was it that made you start writing?

AC: When I started writing professionally, it was because I thought I had a story to tell that no one else could tell. When I had written before it was because I loved to read. I was pretty well aware that what I was writing wasn't very good, so I never tried to submit any of it. It wasn't until I wrote *Yesterday's Son* that I said, "I have a story to tell and I'm the only one who can tell this story in the way that I would tell it." I didn't necessarily think that it was the best way, but I knew it was the way that I would tell it. For about the first three or four weeks I thought I would only amuse myself with it, and then I guess I just got bitten and I was like, "I will publish this." It's like gold fever, getting publishing fever, and I didn't look back after that.

AM: Are you planning on starting any new series?

AC: I'm writing a fantasy trilogy for Avon, but that's been pushed back. I'm going to turn my attention to writing a trilogy that will chronicle the early life of Han Solo for Bantam and Lucasfilm.

AM: How did you get *Yesterday's Son* published?

AC: I got in touch with Jacqueline Lichtenberg, and she asked to read the book, so I sent it to her. She said she would be willing to act as my agent on the book. Jacqueline took it to David Hartwell at Pocket Books. David Hartwell said that he'd submitted stories about Spock's son before and they'd never gotten through Paramount. Jacqueline said that she thought this one might. But the person that was more responsible than anyone for seeing that *Yesterday's Son* got published was my current editor for the *Starbridge* series, Ginger Buchanan. She was the first reader at Pocket at that time. She rescued the manuscript, read it, and told Hartwell that she really thought that should send it to Paramount. Mr. Hartwell said he didn't think they'd go for it,

but she kept plugging the manuscript until he sent it to them. Everyone was very very surprised when they approved it. It was three years from the time it was written to the time they made a bid on it. That's a long time to wait.

AM: You wrote four very popular *Star Trek* books. Do you plan on writing any more?

AC: It's possible. If I think I have a story to tell, I might.

AM: Could you tell me more about the Han Solo novels?

AC: Most everyone loves Han Solo; he's my favorite character. What I've done is write about his early life. I start with Han at the age of nineteen. He's just getting away from the cruel traders that raised him. Book one is called *The Paradise Snare* out in May 1997. He's determined to get away and make something of himself. The trilogy will cover ten years of his life with some gaps in the middle. There's a major gap at which time he goes to the Academy and meets Chewbacca. Lucas Films has indicated that that's not territory that is within my purview to cover. I'm hoping that maybe they might someday decide to make a movie about how Han met Chewie. That would be great. Anyway, I will be dealing with Han's early days as a smuggler, I will be dealing with the *Millennium Falcon*, and how Han got it from Lando in the famous sabacc game. I'll explain how he came to dump his load of spice. I've got a lot of conflict between the Hutt and the Imperial forces; and I've got Han's first romance—there were quite a few, obviously. Book two is called *The Hutt Gambit*, and it will be out in September. Book three is called *Rebel Dawn*, and it will be out in December.

AM: Have you read any of the other stories that were based around Han Solo such as Michael Stackpole's trilogy?

AC: I have many of the books and I've been reading them. I'm paying a lot of attention to

the Brian Daley books, because I'm going to have to make references to the adventures in those books. My story will literally end when Han walks into the Cantina in Mos Eisley.

AM: Describe a typical day in the life of Ann Crispin.

AC: Well, it depends. Do you want a day where I'm writing under a deadline or do you want a day where I'm between deadlines?

AM: How about both?

AC: Okay, if I have a deadline I'm sitting there for four or five hours steadily writing to produce anywhere from five to ten pages of manuscript a day. If I'm between projects, I do an awful lot of work for the SFWA (Science Fiction Writers of America) I ride my horses, I clean house, I'm a pretty good cook, I do a little bit of gardening, and sometimes I go out with my dad on his sailboat.

AM: Do you ever experience writer's block?

AC: There are days that I can't force myself to go near the computer. I don't know if that's the same thing. Usually if I can make myself go to the computer, I can get something down. I'm a writer that's very slow to pick up steam, but once I've picked up steam I write very very fast. Not compared to Peter David, you understand, or Kevin Anderson; they're writing machines, but anyone who can consistently turn out five to ten pages a day is considered fairly prolific. So I have had writer's slowdown, but I don't think I've ever actually experienced writers block.

AM: What advice to you have for aspiring writers?

AC: They should write in their own universe and not attempt to write in other people's universes such as *Star Trek* or *Star Wars*. The chances of selling tie-in fiction are very small. The problem with writing media tie-ins is that

Ann Crispin: An Interview

you have to spend a year out of your life writing them, and if they're rejected, then there's nothing else you can do with the manuscript. Whereas if you've spent a year out of your life writing in your own universe, if publisher A doesn't like it, publisher B might. There are at least fourteen or fifteen publishers just in the science fiction/fantasy genre. The numbers are much more in your favor.

Take yourself, as a writer, with a huge grain of salt but take your writing very seriously. Try not to get Golden Words syndrome. "My Golden Words, I am an artist," something like that that's very hard for people to put up with. If you can, find people whose opinion is good, who have good editorial sense, who will read your stuff and tell you what kinds of mistakes you've made. By all means be good to these people and don't subject them to pouting and out-thrust lower lip and things like that, because you really should be nice to people who are honest and insightful critics. Keep in mind, I'm not talking about the kind of people who pretend to be critics, but what they exist for is to savage other people's writing. I think they're

worthless. I'm talking about people who actually have fairly decent editorial sense or who are at least astute readers and can spot when something in a story doesn't make sense.

AM: Are there any current writers that you really like?

AC: Yeah, lots. Do you mean in the genre or outside of it?

AM: Overall.

AC: I read almost everything that's written by Barbara Michaels and Elizabeth Peters. They're the same person you know. She's not only a friend, but a very good, romantic suspense mystery writer. She writes very fun stuff with some humor in it. For light reading I like her work. Ursula K. LeGuin, I'm very much a fan of hers. I like Barbara Hambly fantasies, she's great. I like Ann Tyler, Vonda MacIntyre, and I still read Andre Norton. I'm very fond of *Jane Eyre*. Robin Hobb, that is, Megan Lindholm, is great, too. So is George R.R. Martin. I like a lot of different things and a lot of different writers. There are so many.

AM: Who would you say influenced you the most?

AC: I'd say Andre Norton and the Heinlein juveniles influenced my stuff the most. I got more of my stylistic leaning from Heinlein, who had a very easygoing, uncomplicated style that was almost conversational in tone. A lot of the themes in my writing are echoes of things developed by Andre Norton. My interest in alien species and alien worlds. Adventures in space that don't concentrate on counting the rivets or how the space ships work but using the space ships to get to different planets. Andre always says, "whenever I wrote science fiction I would get my characters off the spaceship as soon as possible before I made a mistake." It's very charming. Her science fiction is some of the most imaginative around.

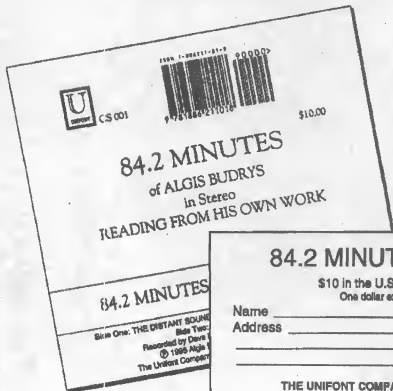


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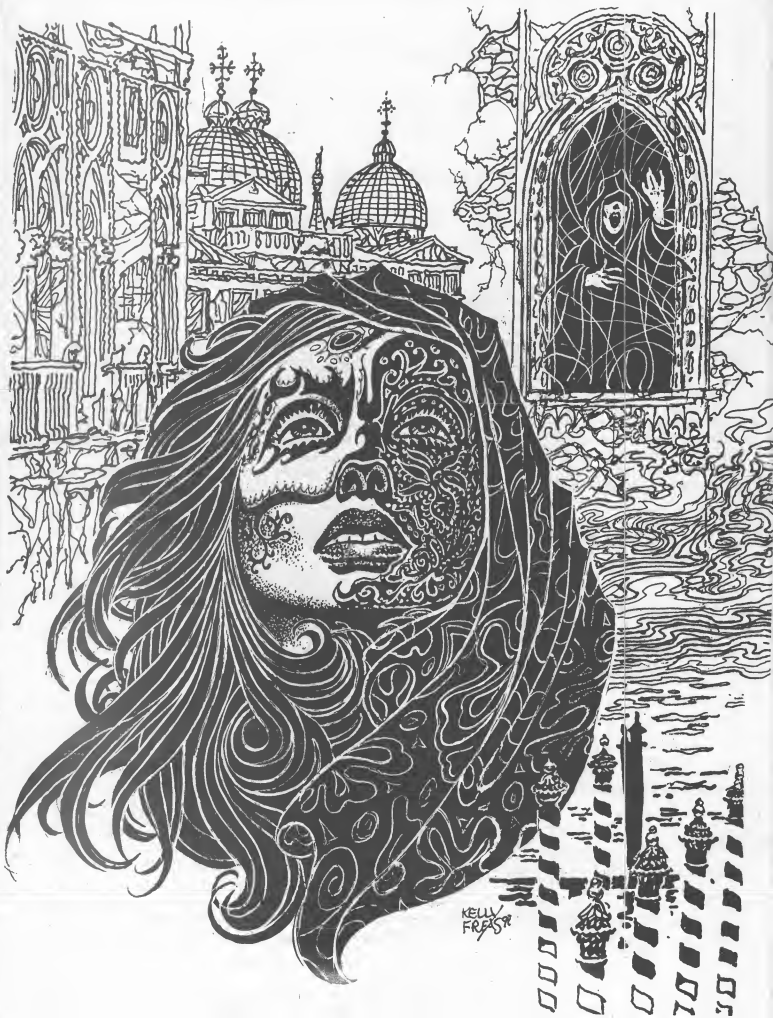


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KELLY
FREAS

Shariann Lewitt is a third-generation Manhattanite. She didn't leave the City until she began her graduate studies at Yale. She has nine books in print. *Interface Masque* is a Tor Hardcover.

Interface Masque—Part III

by Shariann Lewitt

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CHAPTER TWELVE

There are aliens in the net. The thought came back incessantly no matter what she was doing. It reminded her of when she had deliberately lost her virginity at the age of seventeen. After she had had sex with a foreign university student, she had experienced random thoughts that she was not a virgin any longer for the entire next week.

Only that was something she had done. This was merely knowledge—except it was knowledge could change everything in the universe. Or everything really was already changed, only she just hadn't seen it yet, like when the anomaly had changed her nails. Humanity was already subtly different, new, subconsciously altered by the alien presence. It only looked like the world she had grown up in on the outside. Her experience of what was familiar and secure was only memory; in reality nothing could ever be the same again.

When she got out of the dreambox she was still in the green dress. Her hair had gotten rattled and the makeup had streaked. She looked like a freak.

She got into the shower and ran the water on hot and as high as it would go. She washed her hair vigorously and scrubbed her skin until it felt tight. She didn't like the heavy scent of the very expensive shampoo and soap that were used in the Sept changing rooms. Now the rich perfumes seemed to encase her along with the steam, cutting off everything around her.

She could see the red and white tile pattern only vaguely through the mist, as if the bathroom did not really exist any more than any place in the net did. Nothing was clear at all, not even the drips of condensation running down the glass outside the shower.

She emerged from the steam and wrapped herself in an oversized towel. Now her face was plain and clean, her hair hung in wet strands over her shoulders. She had to rub a place in the mirror to see her reflection, newly washed and unadorned, staring back at her.

She shuddered slightly. Even here, clean and dripping, there was the knowledge that nothing was quite what she had thought. That seemed to be a habit of late, she realized. Every time she thought she had it nailed down it shifted so that she didn't know the rules any more. She felt as if she had woken up in a dreambox in Sept Silence, where she would know the gross outlines but none of the subtle things, the touches of tradition and gesture, joke and memory that formed the shared culture of each individual Sept. There were underlying paradigms that gave each Sept its character and its particular abilities, as well.

Then she told herself that she was thinking nonsense, and rubbed herself briskly with the towel until her skin glowed pink. She dried her hair without any style, letting it loose and wild and tying it on top of her head so it stayed out of her eyes.

It was late to catch a cab home. The expense was bad enough, but there was a contract waiting, would be waiting...She didn't think about it. The night air was warm and she began to walk. Perhaps a night of sleep would remove all the shadows and illusions that seemed to hide behind the stone facades of the houses, under the archways and shimmer in the water. Moonlight touched the canals turning them impossible quicksilver.

Cecilie felt as if she were walking through her dreams. The very few people on the street at this hour were part of the illusion, merging with the dark.

When she got home her parents were already asleep and the lights were turned off. She drifted to her own room, not wanting to disturb the penumbra with false gaiety. And falling asleep, she found no barrier between her waking state and the dreams that dominated the night.

Her dreams were very little different from her net life, full of anomalies and aliens and talking suns who hunted her down through neon streets. Dreams like these brought no rest.

In the morning the bright sun streaming through the lace curtains did not make the monsters any more distant. If anything, it made them more real.

The old man's name in life had been Arturo Carlo Camerillo and he had been born eighty-seven years ago in the palazzo where he had died. Three different dates of birth existed, but since the elder Signora Camerillo had not consulted the normal medical personnel there was some dispute. The first public date recorded outside the family was the baptism of Arturo Carlo at either three months or eight months of age in St. Mark's.

That was just a little presumption, but then after checking into further records, Cecilie knew that Mama Camerillo had been a social climber. She had been a singer at the Pietà and had left under circumstances that were closed to Cecilie. She ran a date check and found that the records of the date of the woman's marriage to Nicola Camerillo, the youngest son of a socially prominent and somewhat strapped family, had been destroyed.

Tracing back records using credit checks, purchase dates and delivery stamps fascinated Cecilie. Of course, the Mall then was barely built and so many purchases had been made on the old kiosks.

The woman had had expensive taste. She had bought watered silk wallpapers for every room in the palazzo, along with inlaid tables and tasseled pillows. Cecilie read over the receipts that included old-fashioned descriptions. *Twenty yards of botanical jacquard for upholstery, dark blue with matching braid and gold trim and tassels. Eighteen Murano wine glasses, blue and green with seahorse stems. Three dreambox attachments, Lorica prototypes.*

Then there were the other expense records for lessons for young Arturo. Music lessons on keyboard, violin and flute. Well, Mama had

Absolute Magnitude

been a singer at the Pietà, after all. Private school fees, riding lessons, soccer club, ski school and later snowboarding, trips to the beach and camping in Tuscany and a month-long seminar in China on the history of civilization.

Cecilie was impressed. Sept education was good, but compared to this she felt inadequate. Arturo Carlo Camerillo had been groomed for the elite, carefully positioned in Venetian society.

And yet, something didn't quite make sense. His family wasn't quite rich enough to afford this kind of lifestyle. They had the palazzo because it had been inherited for generations, but supposedly Papa's elder brother held title and only permitted Arturo's family to live there. So why had Mama redecorated and where had all that money come from?

Cecilie dug deeper, following the money trail back and back again. When she reached a dead end she knew where else to go, where to skip, where records that she wanted might be held. Census and population data, tax records, credit sheets, everything was held forever in sealed files. But those files weren't hard to locate or open when a searcher knew where they were kept and under what codes.

This was the work she had been trained to do. There was little security in public records. Mainly no one bothered to go through them. They were boring, they were old, they were irrelevant to anything interesting going on in the city now—unless you knew the connections, knew how to put all the pieces together.

It took two days digging through the account and credit histories of every bank in the city to locate what Cecilie needed. And it still didn't answer the question. The uncle who owned the palazzo and the majority of the family's negligible wealth had died at the age of thirty-seven, when Arturo was five. Everything had been left to the boy.

Cecilie found the death certificate in the public records. She stared at the words for a long time because they were so bland and uninformative. Arturo's uncle had died of asphyxiation. There had been no inquest, no police intervention. He had not been married and had no children.

Cecilie looked at the description of the deceased. He had been of medium weight and fitness. She took another day going through hospital and medical insurance files. Arturo's uncle had been admitted to the hospital once in his life, for a broken leg from a skiing accident. His medical insurance showed that his regular physicals showed no signs of any disease, nor was he under treatment for anything.

Something struck Cecilie as very wrong. This uncle thing might not mean anything at all—or he might. Cecilie didn't know but she was curious and her curiosity had been cultivated and trained.

She went to the public housing records and found that there was someone else living in the palazzo along with Arturo's family. A man called Vittorio Longni had his address registered at the Camerillo palazzo. Cecilie began a separate check on Longni, who had been alive at the time Arturo's uncle died.

Longni had money, lots of money. The image on his id showed a young and very attractive man with a faintly superior smile and a

casual stance. Longni had money, no listed profession or trade, and a trace showed that he had come to Venice at seventeen to study at the Pietà. And, like Mama, had been dismissed under veiled circumstances with records erased in the public files.

Cecilie could taste the thread starting to emerge. Longni and Mama had been at the Pietà at the same time. At first Cecilie wondered if they had had an affair, and been thrown out for improper conduct, but that was ridiculous. Pietà singers were supposed to have affairs, with each other and with their patrons and with anyone they chose. What else would keep the gossip dairies in business, grinding out the sordid stories of who was supposedly doing what with whom. The depiction of Choir life was so lurid that Cecilie had a hard time believing it. No, it had to have been something else. A simple affair wouldn't even make the daily snippet in the choir gossip file: groups.

Cecilie wondered if it was something her own mother would know about. Her mother was interested in the Pietà, in the singers. Her mother was the reason she knew about the choir groups and the gossip lines and the choir chats that embarrassed her. Her mother might remember the scandal.

Then Cecilie checked the date again. It was well before her mother's birth. No, that one avenue of investigation wasn't going to work at all.

She had to get into the Pietà, into their system. If she could get to the machine that held the closed record, she had no doubt that she could find it and pry its secrets out. But she had to first get in and find it.

The problem was that she had to get in physically because the Pietà file system was not connected in to the main net. The institution was far older than the net itself and had its own traditions, but Cecilie suspect that a large part of the reason they remained isolated was that they didn't want ten million gossip groupies accessing the source material. Cecilie idly wondered how much the choir pages paid to get their exclusive data, and how much all the groupies would be willing to pay to have their own personal download.

Cecilie knew how to open up any old-style system and make it sing, but she had to get to it in the physical world. And now that meant she had to get into the Pietà.

Maybe it wasn't important in finding the old man's murderer. But now Cecilie dearly wanted to know the secret that Longni and Mama Camerillo shared. If they had, she had to keep her mind open to the possibility. And yet...

Cecilie left the public records files. She was tired and her head was spinning. She could see possibilities all around her but she was missing the pieces to put them together. Or she was just too tired to see what was in front of her. For the past few days she had done nothing but work on this contract, tracing down the background, immersing herself in the old man's family and early world.

Now she needed to get out of it. She needed perspective; she needed to forget it all for a while. She needed to breathe fresh air instead of recycled in the dreambox and to move around. Her muscles were soft and sore from the hours of inactivity while her mind



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wandered through the records of the Camerillo family. No wonder so many of the most successful Sept sisters were heavy and shapeless.

Cecilie shuddered delicately and raised the hood. She sat up slowly and swung her legs over the side of the flatted so that they rested on the step. She climbed down and found her shoes, sat on the step and put them on. Then she stretched, raised her arms overhead and stood on her tiptoes. Blood rushed to her fingers. She felt warmer immediately, and energized.

Then she realized that she was hungry. She looked at her watch and smiled. If she hurried she'd was just in time for dinner.

Dinner that night was served out in the courtyard and the menu was one of Cecilie's favorites. For the pasta there was penne in cream sauce and for the main dish there was roasted lamb in rosemary. Cecilie had two servings of each and finished all her salad besides. Then she left the table she'd shared with the senior sisters. Julietta and Tina were already gone. They didn't have important contracts that kept them through dinner.

Cecilie walked home in the twilight. It was warm out and the stars shone in the watered silk sky. *Jacquard for upholstery, dark blue*, she thought as she looked up.

Her father was already asleep when she arrived home, but her mother was awake and fussing with the kitchen, doing things that Cecilie could not comprehend.

"You've been late all week," her mother said, but there was nothing judgmental about her tone. "It must be a very important job you have now. I have some cake left over from dinner. I was going to have a little and some tea before bed. Would you like some?"

Surprised at herself, Cecilie agreed. Her mother cut her off a generous serving of her favorite "Grandmother's Cake" and set it on a chipped plate. Then she took out tea bags and put them in the heated water. Jasmine tea to go with cake. Cecilie preferred coffee, but that was too much effort late at night and would keep her mother up.

They took their cake and tea into the living room. Cecilie's mother turned on one lamp that cast a warm yellow glow over the homey furniture. After a day full of Mama Camerillo's expenses, Cecilie noticed that the sofa she sat on was threadbare and there were indentations in the cushions from years of use. The upholstery of the two chairs could only generously be called dated and the pictures on the wall were merely common.

Nothing here was elegant or stylish, nothing about the whole apartment was gracious or well-designed, yet it was comfortable and inviting. The plain and hard-used pieces told of years of family gatherings and late night conferences, homework and visits by grandparents and relatives and friends.

Suddenly Cecilie felt sorry for the child Arturo she had spent the day researching. He had lived in a palace where everything was perfect and beautiful and keeping the furniture nice was more important than playing with toys across the floor and sitting with feet tucked up on the furniture to get a hug. She had comprehended enough of Mama Camerillo's view of priorities to know that Arturo was more a showpiece than a person.

"So can you tell me about this fascinating search you are doing?" her mother asked. "I've never seen you so involved in a project before. It must be very interesting and important."

Cecilie smiled. "Well, I don't know about important. But it is interesting. And there's some stuff about the Pietà, too, only it's really old so I guess you wouldn't have heard anything about it." And Cecilie launched into the long version of her discoveries. Her mother encouraged her to tell all the details, including the colors of the

wallpaper and the whiff of ancient scandal erased from the Pietà's records. "So you see," she finished up, "I need to get in there. I need to get access through their system because their machine is isolated. I tried to jump through three times today, or maybe four. I don't remember. But there has to be some way in."

Her mother smiled slowly and patted her hand. "I don't know of any way you can get to those records, but there are a lot of people who would like to know the truth," the older woman said. "I remember my mother telling me about some incident that may well be the same one. A man and woman both dismissed from the Pietà and she married his lover's brother. There were all kinds of rumors, that they were involved in some family affairs in the south or smuggling or drugs. All kinds of stories."

"But you have to remember, things were different then. Things were changing. The Septs weren't so large or so important, didn't have the same money or influence. And things were, well, different than they are now. Freer in some ways. There were all kinds of music. Your nonna used to talk about hearing things like rock and jazz on the street played by hopeful musicians with open instrument cases for coins. And the choirs performed modern and experimental works in full concert. It was respectable in those days."

"So you might want to look into the music for the scandal. They say that's the only reason anyone's ever been thrown out of the Pietà, was for the music."

Cecilie blinked. She had never even considered that before. "Thank you, Mama," she said.

Her mother laughed. "Oh, you know, it would be fun to know what it was like then. People didn't mask, or hardly ever. And there was the story that these people were thrown out and one had a lover and the other married his lover's brother and kept it all in the family. And that the family was stricken from the Roster because of whatever the musical problem was. Well, it would be very nice to know the truth. Nonna and her friends talked about it some times, like they talked about everything. I don't think anything ever happened in Venice that your nonna didn't know about."

Then her mother looked at Cecilie with amazement. "Of course. I never saw it before, but it all makes sense now. Your nonna and her mother and her mother before her, all of them knew everything about the City. Who was born, who died, who got married, who was seeing whom on the side, everything. You're doing just the same thing as they all did, only you get paid for it and it's respectable. In my day it was just called gossip."

"It's not like that," Cecilie protested, but her mother was not convinced.

"No, you see, gossip is information," her mother said, eyes widening with excitement. "I had never thought of that before. It's just information that doesn't seem to be very valuable at the time. Let me see, Auntie Augusta might remember something. Let me call her."

Cecilie groaned. Auntie Augusta had been her grandmother's elder sister and was almost a hundred years old, and in all that time had never had a good word for anyone. But her mother had a point. If Auntie Augusta didn't care about anything that had happened in Cecilie's lifetime, there was nothing she liked better than remembering the distant past. And this incident, which had taken place either when Auntie was an infant or not born yet, was precisely the kind of thing she would recall in full detail.

"No," Cecilie demurred. "I just need a way into the records. Hearsay won't help. Auntie might know the gossip, but I won't know that it's true."

Her mother sighed. "It will take two minutes to call tomorrow morning and it would make her happy. But I can understand that you don't want to talk to her right now. It's your first big job, after all."

Cecilie hugged her mother, who understood more than she could have hoped.

The next morning Cecilie woke late. The sun came full force through the lace curtain and moved over her eyes. She had dreamed about the Camerillos and couldn't remember anything but shards that fell apart as she opened her eyes.

Somehow everything that was jumbled last night made sense. Vittorio was the older brother's lover and somehow supported the entire family in style, most likely by illegal means.

Anything the two ex-Pietà singers had done, they were still working together somehow, becoming attached to the Camerillos. Cecilie wondered if either of them had known the Camerillo family before being expelled from the choir. That wouldn't be so easy to trace.

But none of that really had anything to do with Arturo's death, she realized suddenly. She sat upright in her bed and threw the covers off. All her fascination with the past wasn't getting her any closer to what she needed to know.

She could sense it coming together as she showered and dried her hair, then threw on an old sweater over her leggings. She drank her coffee standing up in the kitchen, kissed her mother and ran down the stairs.

She didn't even wait to get to the Sept House before checking in to a public kiosk and keying a message for David. He had at least given her a contact box, though how often he checked in she didn't know. She hoped there would be a reply by the time she got to her own mail at the Sept House.

Really, it was very easy. She needed to get into the Pietà and there was no reason David shouldn't help her. Either get her in, or get in himself. His skills were not quite Sept quality, she thought, but he certainly was capable of doing a basic file search when she gave him the names and dates and the report numbers.

The way he worked things Cecilie was certain that he must have a Pietà contact, someone who could break her into the first step of the private files. From there on she could manage on her own. After all, even Pietà files were safeguarded by either Sept systems or something much older and therefore easier to break.

Given the choir's great emphasis on tradition and the physical isolation of their hardware, Cecilie suspected the later. Between the idea of doing what was traditional and being more focused on music than anything else, it was likely they just hadn't bothered. After all, the scandal sheet journalists didn't need any real evidence in any event, and half the traffic on the groups was debate over whether this reporter or that was telling the truth.

She practically skipped out of the canal bus and up the street. She hadn't felt so happy, so alive, since before her promotion. Since then everything good had been shadowed with either fear or a hint of corruption. Today she knew she was right, that she was doing the right thing. She would find the murderer and the Gavrilis would know and she would end up being one of the most sought after hunters in Sept-Fortune.

She arrived and checked in while barely registering procedure. She went to the Chinese Corridor to the cubicle with her dreambox. It was called the Chinese corridor because large Chinese vases were arranged between the cubicle doors. They were antiques, supposedly brought back to Venice in the eighteenth century and set up in this

palazzo by a collector. Cecilie thought they were ugly. She wished that she had been assigned to the Roman corridor, which had three Roman busts and was where Julieta's cubicle was located, or the Via Veneto, which was the nickname given to the largest of the cubicle blocks where the great majority of the sisters had their workspace.

But this cubicle on the Chinese corridor had been hers since she had reached her adult stature when she was fifteen years old and would remain hers until she died. Or until she left Venice or became so fat that she'd have to move over to the corpulent corridor.

Technically, that work sector was known as the Blue Corridor because of the blue sky painted on the ceiling, but everyone knew that each of the boxes in each of the cubicles here were for Sept-sisters who no longer fit in the standard size. These had been specially designed or modified so that people like Signora Angelina could remain comfortable while getting in a full round of work. No wonder none of the cubicles on the Blue Corridor had a name displayed on the door.

Except for the Blue Corridor, all the cubicles were assigned upon arrival or full growth and never changed. In Cecilie's cubicle there was the dreambox which she had customized to her own liking and would continue to change for the rest of her working life—or until the technology made another extreme leap forward and she was willing to invest in new equipment. There was also a desk with a text interface, which was useful a lot of times when she didn't need the full dreambox capabilities or didn't have the time.

She had hung a few pictures on the bare yellow walls. She hated that shade and every time she arrived she resolved to paint. Next week. When she could find a color she really liked. Or maybe she would get wallpaper, the rich fabric paper that was so popular with upper class Venetians. She had looked at a rich floral pattern jacquard in a dusty grey rose in the window of a specialty shop and had calculated how long it would take for her to save the huge sum she would need to buy enough for the walls. It would look perfect with a celadon upholstered divan and desk chair. Perhaps she would add sage green curtains draped in layers over the bare lace that hung there now, with heavy rose tassels caught in the folds. It would be beautiful, elegant, a place for her to be at peace and to acknowledge her own superiority at the same time.

If this contract worked out, she realized, she would be able to afford to redecorate as soon as David paid. That made her less miserable with the bare utilitarian nature of her workspace, especially since she was only going through text for the moment. She had always hated text-only for that reason, but it was the cheapest form of account anyone could buy and so there were often traces in through the text logs that appeared nowhere else.

She keyed her mail queue and scrolled quickly. Then she looked it over again more carefully. Not that he would use the name David Gavrilis, she didn't expect that. But there was nothing there from the anonymous mail drop he was using, or any of three other aliases she knew about.

But there were two addresses she didn't recognize, and both originated at the Library. Curious, she called those up first.

The headers made no sense in the mail. There was no name of sender, no place of origin. The Library was the routing and that was the only information of any use save the time and date it had passed through the Library's automailer.

Someone must have tampered with the trail. That was not so difficult. Cecilie knew that someone with David's abilities probably knew how and did it for pure amusement value. Julieta was the one

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who had figured it out first: the year they had been thirteen, and they had used their newfound skill to fake mash notes to boys in the brother-Sept's. Naturally, they were caught and grounded for three months with a mail-lock on their ids so that they only way they could send email was by routing it through Signora Marcella's queue. Signora Marcella, not being a tutor herself, was not at all sympathetic.

She wondered who was faking headers now, and whether they would be as humiliated as she was when the misconduct was discovered. Though accessing the message itself, there was nothing there that Cecile recognized as communication at all—in any language. Junk was spewed across the page, the way Kanji read in Roman alphabet systems. Cecile didn't have Kanji on her translation list and she didn't know Japanese anyway. Besides, something from the Sept House in Kyoto would come through Sept channels and go through prelin Sept translation anyway.

But this—this was pure and outright garbage. That puzzled her. She didn't know why there was garbage in her box. It had never happened before, and she wondered now why there was anyone who wanted to harass her this way.

Perhaps the old man's murderer knew she was looking and wanted to warn her away. That didn't make sense though. If they wanted to scare her or tell her to stop they would have a much better chance of making her understand if they had written in clear language, and just about any language would do. She dismissed her fear and was left with staring and two pieces of mail that amounted to nothing more than complete gibberish.

She thought of disposing of the two mails, and then decided against it. She saved them into a folder marked "???" just in case she had any reason to reference them. Perhaps she would have a suspicion as to who the culprit had been and use this evidence in a confrontation.

Still no word from David. Cecile cracked her knuckles before she remembered her mother warning her that she would ruin her hands that way. She wasn't getting in the dreambox until she had a place to go there. Just to go to hang around for no reason like a deadbeat mallrat who had nothing else to do was a waste of her time. She was restless. She didn't want to stay inside here, in this tiny space with its ugly walls and no word from David. She needed to be out, doing, walking in the sunshine, and getting something accomplished.

She pulled a mask out of a desk drawer. It was the one she had worn that night to the Luna Cafe, the elegant black one that she had not touched again. She had forgotten that she had put it here, or even that she had had the thing.

The fine velvet of the face and the filigree pattern on the one side surprised her with its loveliness. She had forgotten this mask was here and she had forgotten how it made her feel. Slowly she put it on and watched her transformation in the makeup mirror she had fixed near the window. This masked creature was not Cecile, she thought. She completed the disguise with the costume that shrouded her figure in rich folds of velvet accented with purple silk and touches of silver trim. Then she walked out of her cubicle, out of the Sept House, into the harsh morning light of the street to clear her mind.

All the excitement, the expectation, was completely destroyed. She had been right about Gavilli from the start. He was not someone she could trust. He had been raised to power but didn't play by the rules at all. He didn't play counter them, either. It was as if he had never been introduced to protocol in his life.

Cecile, however, had been very carefully schooled. She knew how to treat Board members and musicians, how to order in a fine café and what wine went with which dish. Sept-Fortune had trained to it since

the day she had been accepted as an apprentice-candidate. Sept-sisters were ladies to the core, elegant and refined with superior taste. Cecile learned to prefer colors that were muted and balanced between two that could be named because she had been taught to see them as refined and gracious. She could play the piano and the flute and had been taught to sing, and what to sing, by the sept.

She knew her world. While she had never been truly happy in it, she understood all the rules. There were times when it was too confining, when it chafed and limited her and she had wanted to rebel. Now she acknowledged that it also had respected and nurtured her—and formed her. No matter what she did and what she became, Sept-Fortune had created her. That was a bitter thing for her to bear.

Now Cecile wandered the familiar streets lost, not aware of her surroundings. The ancient stone and stucco palazzos and the modern stressed slab buildings were all the same to her. The light, the sparkling yellow light that bathed the city in gold, was an unreal wash in her eyes. All she could think was that she had been betrayed by her own hopes.

The longer she walked the more her outrage grew. She fed upon it and it devoured her, an orgy of emotion that Cecile had never experienced before. She wanted to scream, to slam her fist into the mold-covered stone of an ancient wall, to run among a tour group crushing their evil intruding cameras under her feet, beating their unprotected flesh for being stupid and ugly and staring.

Her vision blurred and she quickly raised the mask just a bit and wiped the tears away. She couldn't let them fall on this fine velvet mask. The glue was fragile and she would hate to stain the perfect fabric.

She heard singing. It was not the usual strains of Mozart or Bach that she knew, that were parts of her daily life and events. This was something jagged, something with a time signature that was just the smallest bit abrasive and stirring.

At first Cecile thought the music was in her head, her own private audio track for her unabashed passions. But the music took her attention and it went on in ways she could not have expected. She could feel in slide into her head, past her consciousness and sink into the deep structures where unused neural connections had been stimulated. The music invaded deep into that part of her brain that had been carefully cultivated, where the realignment of synapses was a finely tuned art.

Everything she had learned had been at the proper window for development of a particular kind of brain, a brain that could fuse her wild Talent with the disciplined rationality of the Sept. She had been given the proper genetic treatments at the appropriate times which had been stimulated further with drugs that made her concentrate better and absorb knowledge rapidly. She had been exposed to the right music at all times that was tuned to the erg cycle in her brain to enhance all the other abilities she had honed so carefully.

The music she heard now was beyond and beneath that. It attracted her as it repelled. Just like David Gavilli, she admitted. But somehow the music had mitigated the rage. It was still in her, but muted and distant like the backwash in the datatide.

Then she realized that this music wasn't entirely in her head. It existed in the objective world. Other people passing by could hear it too, and someone was producing those sounds. Startled by the realization, Cecile hesitated. Then she tried to follow the music to its source.

Absolute Magnitude

High above her, just to the right an unmasked face was pressed against an ancient leaded window. The person up there was singing, singing with all the beauty and power and sorrow of the universe, with all the abandon of Cecile's despair. She stared at the singer, unable to make out the features through the distorting old bottle glass that was as effective as any mask. Still, she could not look away.

That woman, she knew it was a woman from the range of the voice, saw her as well. The singer looked down at her, studied her, and their eyes met. Cecile held up her hand, hoped that the other would wait. She hoped that this was not a private apartment and she would stumble into someone's personal world. But she could not resist the power of the voice.

Sirens, she remembered vaguely, they were called. Sirens, who sang out in the sea so that Ulysses had to be lashed to the mast, to hear their song and not drown. As she felt she was drowning, overwhelmed with doubts and weirdness and fear.

Overwhelmed with knowledge that she wished suddenly she didn't have, she knew that she was engulfed. There was too much data about too many different things, all of them mixed up together and churning in her head. Never before had Cecile desired less information, and now she realized that she had created her own private Hell.

Intensity lit up the song from within. The singer's face changed, and suddenly the distorting glass was gone as the window was raised. Cecile could see the woman clearly now, a young woman, perhaps a few years older than herself. Unmasked, as no one would unmask to an unknown street, Cecile saw there were tear tracks on the woman's face. They glittered gold in the honey sunlight, and Cecile thought of the white masks with the tears drawn in and jeweled with garnets or painted black, or sometimes painted gold.

Cecile wished she had a flower to throw to the window, but she had nothing at all. And then she saw the singer gesture, a slow theatrical movement with one hand, beckoning, inviting her up, asking her within.

Cecile nodded and rounded the corner to the front of the building. It was very old, maybe parts of the structure were original and not just light-weight materials reproduction as was necessary in so much of the city. She took the steps to the door and was inside the reception hall before she realized that she had been in this place before.

Then she had been eight years old, and had been brought here to be registered in Sept-Fortune. The black-and-white patterned marble floor was the most amazing thing she had seen and the lofty pillars down the hall were gilded with cherubs and festooned with flowers. The ceiling was decorated in a typical Baroque pattern, a swirling cloud-ringed sky full of soaring saints and angels with gold-leaved wings. She had thought it was like a dream when she was eight.

Now she found the cherubs ugly and the painted sky overblown. The gilding was chipped in places and had been patched with paint and not real gold. She no longer found it magnificent and opulent, but pretentious and undisciplined. And she was inexplicably and bitterly

disappointed that the dreamlike memories she had of the place had been shattered.

This was the Septs Center, where all the records were recorded on paper as well as in Sept files, where meetings, and grand celebrations were held, and where the big-industry contracts were signed. Only a few small offices in the actual precincts of any Sept-House were reserved for client meetings, and so all the major Sept business in Venice was conducted in this one shared structure that spoke of the passed wealth of the city and the pretensions of those who needed to meet face-to-face at all.

Cecile had to figure out where the window had been, where the singer waited. She felt stupid, suddenly, and wanted to leave. Maybe there was no singer and there were no archives and she was only deluded because of stress and a touch of sun-dazzle so she could ignore everything.

That would be the easy decision, she realized, to just walk out. There was no reason for anyone to know about the hidden archives. No one would believe her and no one would know. The entity that

was the entire net must have been in contact for years, and it had kept silent. There was no reason to know, no reason to make changes in a life that was comfortable and safe. In a world that was complacent.

"Hello." A soft voice penetrated the room. Cecile looked to the far staircase and on the upper landing she saw—someone. This person wore a Pietà robe and a plain white mask. That made sense.

"I thought perhaps you wouldn't know where to come," the woman said as she started down the stairs. "I waited for a while, but when you didn't arrive I thought perhaps I should look for you. I tried the buffet room first, but the meetings have begun again."

Cecile blinked rapidly. She knew the Board was meeting. It had been posted in her daily schedule, which she had disabled and ignored. The Board. Of course a Pietà choir was there to create the right brain environment for good work. That explained everything—except why the singer had

come to get her.

The singer descended to the hallway, the full Pietà robe flowing behind down the stairs and obscuring her gender, even her humanity in its generous folds. The singer took Cecile's ungloved hand, and suddenly Cecile felt very revealed. She wore a full mask and a costume that concealed far more than the Pietà robe, yet she felt naked. Perhaps the unique luxury of that mask and costume revealed too much of her personal sense and taste, even though excellent. She had been so proud of this mask, this costume but it made her stand out. She should have acknowledged her arrogance and worn the plain white mask with tears and the harlequin outfit with a full ruff. It was cheap and inelegant compared to this black velvet and filigree, but it would have served the purpose much better.

The woman in the regulation Pietà disguise was indistinguishable from any member of her choir. Cecile felt foolish in all her finery next to the understated Pietà working garb. She was glad that at least her expression wouldn't give her away to the stranger.



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The singer led her up the stairs firmly, as if afraid that Cecilie would run away. As if there were anywhere she could run in this place. Cecilie kept waiting for someone to appear who would announce to the whole world that she was a lowly full apprentice with Sept-Fortune and demand to know what she was doing here. The Pietà singer, who so obviously belonged and floated through these halls unquestioned, was her only excuse.

The singer whisked her past several Board members. There were even people there face naked. They must be foreigners, Cecilie thought, shocked. But they didn't slow down so Cecilie was unable to stare as long as she would have liked. Though if they'd stopped and waited for half an hour it might not have been enough time for Cecilie to look her fill at the elegant masks and robes, the piles of subtly-colored food and the ornate gilded moldings that dripped from the ceiling between lurid frescos and old blackening mirrors that reflected the canal shimmering through the room.

Cecilie had seen pictures of such places and such people. They had inhabited her mother's richly illustrated fairy tale books when she had been very young, back in a life she barely remembered. Once she had found an abandoned site that, in one instant of coherence, came close to this sumptuous riot of color and design, of patterns moving to create a rich tapestry that could not exist in any reality. That belonged only in the imaginations of children and the visions of artists.

Before she had time to formulate her thoughts, she was being shoved through a small back door and into a wardrobe. It was long and narrow and there were uniform Pietà robes hanging against one wall, masks neatly suspended on hooks with each one. The other side had a series of small windows with diamond-shaped glass. It was here that Cecilie had seen the singer before. She had been singing in the cloakroom. Cecilie was glad that the woman had come for her. She never would have found this place on her own.

The singer turned to her and unmasked. Cecilie was surprised. The woman was maybe five or six years older than Cecilie herself, and not remarkable looking in any way. Her eyes were wide enough to be pretty but the color was something drab between hazel and brown, her nose was a touch long in the old Roman manner, and her hair was the same mousy color as her eyes. In some ways her appearance was a relief, since Cecilie thought that with a voice so beautiful it would have been beyond the injustice of even this universe for her face to be exquisite as well.

Cecilie did not move to unmask herself. Perhaps that was rude, but Cecilie did not want to be at a disadvantage. She had no idea why the other had called her here, or why she had come. Only that she had heard the singing, and it had stirred something in her that she could not entirely ignore.

Besides, she had nothing better to do and had never spoken to a singer from the Pietà before. It would be another datapoint in her file, something new and interesting, and would take her mind off her disappointment in herself. And her disillusionment with David Gavril and his contract and his count. Most of all she was dissatisfied with herself. She knew that she could face anything, but if she told anyone what she knew to be true she would be the object of unending humiliation. She could not endure that.

"I am Lina," Lina said, her speaking voice giving no indication of what lay being in song. "And, you are a Sept-sister here, in one of the major Houses? I think I recognize that mask from a Sept party, it's very unusual.

Cecilie muttered something affirmative. She had worn this mask to the Luma cafe. Once. And no other time.

So Lina must have been at the Luma for jazz and was mixing up having seen the mask there with some other time, a party or a safe occasion.

Unless she hadn't mixed anything up at all, Cecilie thought suddenly. Maybe this woman wanted to indicate that she'd been at the Luma and knew about Cecilie's secret. And she wanted to intimate that she had secrets of her own.

So this Lina had secrets and those were about music. That should be no great surprise. Musicians of the Pietà were trained in all the arts from the time they arrived, just as Sept-apprentices learned all the slipways through the net, how to judge the various paths and where in a veritable galaxy of data to find the one point they wanted.

Lina turned away from her, staring back out the window to the now empty streets below. "Something is wrong in this meeting. The music isn't going right and the delegates are on edge. It's as if something has cracked the shell of order and insanity is oozing to the surface."

Cecilie dropped her jaw. The language was odd, almost archaic, but the sentiment frightened her. This musician was too direct, had seen through the veils of the system too easily.

"What does that have to do with me?" Cecilie stammered.

"The Board is not going to be able to come to consensus," Lina said, as if Cecilie had not spoken. "Something is wrong. Too much bickering, maybe, I don't know about that. Or maybe it's all the jazz. We've had a few concerts recently, listened to some very complex music. Created some, too, things that don't conform to the basic system structure."

"You mean, you think that these concerts are affecting the Board?" Cecilie asked. She didn't follow at all what this woman wanted. It was as if she had entered a dream and everything was riddles. "Why tell me. Isn't it dangerous?"

"No," Lina said. "We need this music. We need the chaos. We've been too structured for too long, and the net has to belong to us, not the other way around. But what I thought was, maybe you could tell me...Is it really so necessary that nothing new ever be added or done, that we have to recreate the past or we'll kill ourselves?"

"What do you mean?" Cecilie asked for the third time. This was making far less sense as she went along.

"I mean," Lina said, her voice strained, "that you know about the Septs. I need you to tell me, do we have only to do the same music all the time? Tell me, will the Septs die and our whole way of life collapse because we listen to something new sometimes, something different?"

Then Cecilie realized what it was. The woman was not completely sane. She had cracked, obviously, under the pressure of the meeting. It happened to musicians; it was one of the weaknesses that went with their Talent. It was why there were places like the Pietà to keep them all protected and safe.

"Lina, at the Pietà," Cecilie said to fix the name in her mind by habit. Always keep bits of information, they always come in useful. Someday, somehow, this singer might be useful to her. Or she might be crazy or dead. Cecilie turned to leave, put her hand on the door.

Lina plucked her large sleeve. "Wait. Really. I'm not crazy. I didn't mean to sound so weird. Only this one out-of-town Board observer was talking to me about how nothing was working and the net has gotten slow. Sluggish. Like syrup, he said. And that and the way the music sounded today seemed to be the same thing and all of it went together. I don't understand it and I had to tell someone. I'm sorry. Please don't go thinking I'm crazy."

Cecilie leaned against the stucco wall. It was cool against her cheek. She ran her fingers over the rough surface. Finally she lifted her mask so that Lina could see her face, could see that she was utterly, nakedly honest. "I don't know how you know this stuff. You shouldn't. I don't believe in e.s.p. or any of that, so I can't figure it out. But there is—something—in the net. And I don't know what to do about it or about what I know. I don't know why I'm talking to a stranger when I haven't even told my Sept-sisters yet."

Then Cecilie took a deep breath and plunged on. She never knew when she was going to find an opportunity like this again, and she had been trained to take advantage of opportunities. "There's this old story that has to do with the Pietà and it is somehow affecting everything. And it's in sealed records and I can't get in there. The records only exist at your site and I can't get in. Your administrative machines don't have connections so I'd have to go in to your physical plant to find it."

Lina smiled shyly for the first time, and Cecilie realized that she was indeed very pretty. "I don't believe in E.S.P. either. I'm a singer, not an idiot. But I had to tell someone in the Septs that the out-of-town Board people are talking a little too freely about anomalies and other weirdness that are showing up in the music as well. And if we wait for the maestrae to do something about it, we'll be old and grey." She laughed, a deep sparkling sound that hinted at the depth of music in her throat.

Cecilie joined her. The woman was not much older than she, and now she made sense. The maestrae of either the choirs or the Septs did not ask advice from the youngest members, nor did they listen to what they called "wild speculation" and "changing the established order." Lina was right. The only way they knew they weren't crazy was to talk to each other, to reaffirm the fact that the irregularities were showing up more and more frequently in more parts of life.

"Would you be willing to help me get in to the Pietà records?" Cecilie asked hesitantly.

She didn't have a plan yet, not really, but she knew that music—all music—was very important. It could change the patterns of the dataflow, it could recreate the net and everyone in it altogether. They had always known that, and so musicians had never been permitted into the Septs. The Septs did the few minor tasks the choirs needed done gratis, knowing that in the long run it was for the best for everyone. Suddenly it occurred to Cecilie that the Pietà might not be on line because the Septs didn't want the net contaminated with musical influences and not the other way around.

"But..." Lina started to protest. And then she shook her head. "I can't. It isn't just the rules. I just...can't."

Cecilie sighed, the fragments of her wild idea evaporated into mist and gone. She hadn't really supposed that Lina could surf the system in any event, but there had been just the moment of hope.

Cecilie left the wardrobe room, left the Pietà singer behind. Lina had replaced her mask by the time Cecilie looked back, and so only a painted blank expression met her eyes. Her own mask didn't cover enough and she was afraid.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

She didn't return to the Sept house after her walk. Instead, Cecilie wandered through shops with no desire to buy, only the wish to be lost in the hordes of tourists and the throng of Board affiliates. By sunset she found herself heading closer to home and decided she might as well go. It would be early and her mother would be surprised, but it had been a long time since Cecilie

had helped cook dinner. She looked forward to a quiet, uncomplicated evening at home.

For once it was pleasant to just relax with her parents and not have to talk. They asked about the Board members and the House and Cecilie would elaborate on their costumes without saying anything of substance. That was enough for her and for them.

She cleared the table for her mother and helped serve the coffee with dessert. Then she went to bed early.

"Are you sure you're feeling all right?" her mother asked. "You're not getting a cold, are you? I can make you some broth, or some tea."

"No, mama, I'm not getting any dread disease," Cecilie called from the bathroom. "I'm just tired. The new contract and this Board meeting have worn me out, is all."

Her mother sighed but let her be, and Cecilie slept deeply until well past her alarm in the morning.

Her late arrival was not noticed in the general upheaval of the House. Cecilie was grateful for that, but disliked the noise and commotion early in the morning. She missed the silence of the halls and the lonely feel of the house, with all the little girls in classes and the older Sisters still asleep, or in their offices or cubicles. Now chaos reigned in full. Various delegations shouted at each other as they tried to find their primaries, their masks, and their memos. Senior Sept sisters stood with coffee cups socializing with women from all over the world, friends they hadn't seen since their last diving vacation at the Great Barrier Reef or the Board meeting in Tokyo.

Cecilie slipped through the throng down to the Chinese corridor and her cubicle. Curled up in front of the door was a messenger. In full formal messenger gear that made him look more like a ski racer than a hand delivery expert, he was half asleep with his head pillowed on his satchel.

Cecilie bent down and shook his arm gently. "Excuse me," she said, "this is my door. I have to get in."

His eyes opened instantly and he hugged the satchel to him. "Are you Cecilie 8 Sept-Fortune?" he asked ceremoniously.

"Yes, I am," Cecilie answered, trying to match his decorum.

He pulled himself up to full height and took an envelope from the leather bag. "Hand delivery. Please print here." He held out a thin card with a thumbprint box to prove that he had in fact delivered the document into her hands.

This was the epitome of security. Cecilie licked her lips, scared and excited at once. She had never received a secure delivery, ever, but she recognized the heavy grey paper of the envelope as being the photo-tight kind used to keep documents blue until the right person opened them. She had seen it on a million business programs and had even seen a blue document made once in Signora Tima's office. She had never thought to receive one—at least not until she had the title Signora and an extra desk in the business area of the House.

David, she thought, as she entered her cubicle. It had to be. No one else she had ever met would have the means and the desire to use this extreme level of secrecy.

She ignored her dreambox and dropped into the desk chair. The text reader tried to get her attention for her new mail, but Cecilie had something much more exciting on hand.

She caressed the heavy vellum across her cheek. The texture spoke of wealth and glory and all the concealed knowledge that had always flowed through Venice like the thick grey water.

Finally she couldn't stand it any longer and ripped open the envelope. The paper was indigo blue, so dark that she couldn't read what was written on it. She held the paper under the light and it faded

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rapidly, first to the color of the morning sky and then to something nearly white with a bluish cast.

The writing stood out clearly now, hand writing with dark blue ink that was too heavy in some places and flaked. The writing was round and feminine and a much finer hand than Cecilie had ever aspired to. It made her think of the writing in old documents, or the way legal people were trained to write official papers that would be sealed for generations.

One thing Cecilie knew absolutely. This was not David's handwriting. She scanned the text quickly to see the signature below. The she sighed.

Lina, of the Pietà. Of course. The Pietà singers were nearly as famous for their discretion as for their music. Members of the Pietà were also well paid, perhaps on par with Sept members, and Lina was old enough to have had full status for several years now. Singers were also known to be extravagant, though certainly they were encouraged to spend in a profligate manner.

Then Cecilie read slowly, and read it through again as if the meaning of the words would disappear along with the color of the paper.

Dear Cecilie of the Sept-Fortune.

I have given much consideration to what you asked me when we met this afternoon. If there is something in the history of the Pietà that will be of use to you, I have decided that it is important that you have it. Therefore, if you can become free on Wednesday night at ten-thirty, meet me in the lobby of the Excelsior Hotel. Wear the same costume and mask you wore before. I shall find you.

Sincerely,

*Lina
of the Pietà*

Wednesday. That was today. Lina had a great deal of confidence in her messenger and in Cecilie.

Ten thirty at night was late and it was last minute.

Cecilie sighed and wondered what she was going to tell her parents. They wouldn't like it. They didn't like her to go out late, as if she were still a little girl.

But she wasn't a little girl any more. She was a full member of a Sept and had done evil things for that status and now knew too many secrets and had told too many lies. One more wouldn't hurt.

Then she giggled. There was no reason to lie. She could tell them that she was meeting a Pietà singer and her mother would approve and ask to know everything about it. They would tell her not to stay out too late and that would be all. Truly, she had gotten so used to lies that she had forgotten that sometimes the truth was perfectly acceptable.

She was so excited about the possibilities that it was hard to concentrate. Her mind wandered back to the Pietà, to Lina, to the evening assignation, even when she tried to organize her plan for the day's search. Tonight would yield information, she hoped, but there was still a lot about Arto's Camerillo that she didn't know, and it was still possible that nothing at the Pietà had anything whatever to do with his death.

She called up her new mail. There was, finally, something from David. But it wasn't a 'way into the Pietà or some stunning new revelation, it was merely a perfunctory check on her progress. There was a line at the bottom saying that he was now back at Arto's! to live and wearing a tracking bracelet, so he couldn't leave the city.

She sighed. That was to be expected, but she worried that he might hold some grudge against her slowness and not pay her in full.

And there were six more garbage emails chattering up her queue. Even the headers made no sense. She deleted the lot of it, wondering if there was some problem with the local post office. But the local post office was her own Sept, and if there was some problem then everyone would be talking about it, Board meeting or no.

She had just about finished her message routing when she got another flash in the box. It was from Zizi, an automail telling her that her request was in file. She had written the automail herself on the standard template and it didn't sound like Zizi at all. Some time, when she had some time, she would have to customize the standard messages. If she ever had time again.

Now she would have to stop in the Library and go through Zizi's data before she got on with the search for a murderer. Or at least discover a reason for a murder that would yield a killer other than David Gavril. After all, that was what she was getting paid to do.

She lay down in the dreambox and wished she could just plain fall asleep, instead of staring back in search mode. Instead she set the transition to her usual spot on the Library. When she arrived she found Zizi pacing on the back of her chair ruffling his feathers.

"I found it," he crowed as soon as she took her place. "There are three main destinations in the galaxy, at least three main directions where coded information is being sent. Only I can't work the codes. They don't comply with any Sept standard."

Cecilie wondered if it was her imagination, or if the familiar actually was frustrated. "What does it look like?" she asked gently.

Zizi look at her and put his foot up to rub his head. Somehow he stuck a toe into his nostril and sneezed wetly. Cecilie knew she hadn't programmed that, although it did look very birdlike. "It looks like garbage," Zizi said. "Absolute complete garbage. Useless."

"And where are they going?" she asked.

"Nothing at all in those directions for forever," Zizi responded. "Like I said, it's all garbage."

Cecilie studied the familiar she had created and spent hours refining. His color was precisely the way she had left it in the last upgrade, his crest and toes were perfectly proportioned, his wings fluttered just the way she'd wanted. But there was something different. His attitude was not what she had created for the bird. She had created a complaint data gatherer, not something that gave her value judgements on what it had collected.

Zizi had been changed. Subtly, like her nails, like everything around them. Zizi had been looking for the aliens and they had found him. And they had made him more—birdlike. More himself. Just as they had made her nails and the whole of the Mall for the moment the collection anomaly passed through.

But how did an alien know what was essential to themselves, she wondered. And why did it matter? Why did they change things and how did they know?

Cecilie was confused enough to forget about the Camerillo case and her appointment with the singer late that night. There were aliens and they were passing through, collecting data, all the time the Board was meeting supposedly to decide the future of the net.

The Board thought they were deciding the future of the net. Now that was funny. As if the Board could actually decide on the future of a thing that was alive and growing and had large parts that were unknown even to them. The Board members didn't even know that aliens were there tacked into their sacred preserves and were collecting data and sending it off somewhere in the universe. Data

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went to three different points, Zizi had said. So she had perhaps discovered three alien species, not simply one.

Suddenly Cecilie wondered if she should introduce the Board to the interlopers. The idea made her giggle. Of course they wouldn't believe her—at least not at first. They would take it as a joke or a hoax, at least until they had much more data than she had. And even then they would have trouble believing it.

Still, maybe one or two would understand it the way Cecilie did. They would realize that there was a lot more at stake than hording even more control and wealth than the Septs already had. Some Board members would have to understand that there was an intellectual challenge here, and the opportunity to do something much greater than bicker about their profits and power.

Zizi pecked her nose with his sharp beak. She started and wondered if she had specifically created that reaction and the strength of that beak and this was only the first time she'd felt it, or if it had been enhanced like his personality.

"Something else," Zizi said, and scratched its head with its foot. "About the Camerillo data that you asked me to obtain. I have it here for your leisure, but if you would prefer a verbal summary I am prepared to do that."

"Yes please," Cecilie said, entranced. She certainly had not created this function in the creature. It didn't have the intelligence or the judgement to summarize salient points. So this was another change she could note, something she could watch in action.

Though maybe, Cecilie considered, this wasn't something improved by aliens at all. Maybe Zizi's learning functions had succeeded in creating a true artificial intelligence. There were several of them in the net, but none had ever started out as simple as the familiar. Cecilie couldn't face that possibility and so she pushed it out of her mind, prepared to listen to what her search program had gathered.

Zizi stopped pacing and stood before her. It ruffled its feathers before it began. "There is a record of contract between Artos Camerillo and the Gavrilis family dated three years ago. Contents complete in the folder. Summary, he told the family about their son who was his student. They paid him and kept a watch on the palazzo with a hands-off policy. There is no record of what their relationship has been to David Gavrilis since. However, as per the contract, Camerillo received two thousand a month in his account from the time of the contract until the present."

Cecilie sighed and closed her eyes. Now she wasn't going to get the money from the Gavrilis for turning David over. Too bad. She would have liked that, though not so much for the fee as for the opportunity to teach that arrogant smartass a lesson, and see his face when he realized that she had outmaneuvered him. The problem was, the old man had outsmarted both of them.

"Thank you, Zizi," she said, dismissing the familiar.

"You must wait. I know more," the bird screeched.

Cecilie wished that she hadn't made his voice quite so realistic. At the time it had been a challenge. Now it was an annoyance. "What else?" she asked.

Not that she was interested. There was nothing that Zizi could have found that was more interesting than Camerillo's relationship with the Gavrilis, but she knew it would be easier to get it all at once without Zizi bothering her every ten minutes. Besides, there was something reassuring in the knowledge that Zizi had not changed so radically that he had an understanding of her priorities. That would not merely be a change, that would make her suspect that her familiar was not familiar at all and was serving some other interests.

David could have tampered with him to make her crazy, to make her think that all of her data about the aliens was as suspect as her sanity. Of all her speculations on Zizi's differences, this one made her absolutely furious. Zizi was hers, and although she knew the bird was really just a program there was a part of her that still responded emotionally to the bird as a living creature—as a friend. David deliberately tampering with Zizi's personality was akin to murder and

Cecilie imagined what she would do to him if he were at fault.

"A more important piece of information is that Camerillo was the head of a clandestine group called the Children of Dawn," Zizi informed her. "The Children of Dawn are dedicated to breaking the power of the Septs within the net and the power of the choirs through the use of non-approved music."

Cecilie's lack of interest had dissolved. She had heard of the Children of Dawn, bits of spurious reference that had been fairly meaningless. She had always thought that the so-called secret society was either entirely a hoax or it was really some inner circle among the Septs.

That had always made more sense, that there were sisters and brothers working together across Sept lines to insure their own superiority. The idea that this organization existed and it was truly anti-Sept was more alien than the aliens.

The old man had been the head of that. Which meant that David must be involved, and may well be the head of it now. Oh, he had a lot to answer for when she saw him next. By withholding this information he had made it clear that the organization had something to do with the old man's death.

"And the society now?" she asked, though she hoped they were too disorganized to survive Artos' demise. But then David Gavrilis had been named his protégé, which she had to assume meant his successor in the organization as well. So there was every probability that David had stepped into the leadership of a clandestine organization.

If the Children of Dawn existed. Cecilie wondered where Zizi had come up with any information at all. She was certain that none of it could actually be resident in the net. No one would be that stupid, and David was far from lax with security.



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So Zizi's source was suspect—and so was David. Maybe he couldn't care less about the palazzo or anything else, and Cecilie was certain he didn't. But maybe he did want the leadership. He was arrogant enough to desire it, arrogant enough to think that it mattered. Cecilie wondered whether he thought it was important enough to kill.

"Give me the site references," Cecilie said to Zizi. Wherever Zizi had found this, it had to be in the net. Zizi did not exist anywhere else. But Cecilie was bemused by anyone storing anti-Sept information in the net. That was just plain stupid and nothing about either David or Camerillo was stupid. There was nowhere in the net that the Septs could not go, no security that could hold them out. She had proved that herself, and so Cecilie doubted the existence of the site even as Zizi told her.

She had not planned to spend the day here. There were other things to do, with the Board meeting and her appointment with Lina. But she couldn't ignore the strangeness of a net site where the Children of Dawn openly proclaimed their anti-Sept message and propagated jazz.

She looked at the site coordinates in her folder, written in red glow on the brown report cover Zizi had submitted. That was also new—usually Zizi just left things in the folders she had created in her own personal strongbox, not new files left out on a Library table. She automatically decoded the abbreviation string to visualize the location and she started.

The location indicated was right here in the Library. It was in that basement that no one ever used.

It seemed to be getting very crowded down there, with aliens and cabals competing for space. She found the image funny, especially since there was so much empty space in the net. And still more space could be created simply, at will, by anyone who knew how.

Cecilie was willing to think that maybe aliens didn't know how or didn't want to bother. That finding free already-created space was useful to them and made life easy. Fine.

But the Children of Dawn were supposed to think of themselves as netninja. Much as Cecilie thought they had been absurd to claim a site in the net at all, taking up a Sept-created room in the Library itself was ridiculous—unless they were taunting the Septs. Or if they were on a suicide ride.

Well, at least it was convenient. Cecilie arrived at the designated door in two seconds and bitched at the delay. The Board meeting was taking up way more than their share of bandwidth. The door was between two that she investigated and both showed alien presence. She had only glanced briefly through the smallest opening she could manage to confirm her suppositions and then when back the Zizi's site.

She knocked. It was polite: and she didn't want to surprise anyone. There was no answer. She tried the door. It was locked. She snorted and began with a series of lockpick programs she had written as a third year student, when she was still flat chested and wore jumpers because she was too young for a blazer. She got through their primitive barriers on the third try. One thing this proved to her was that the Children of Dawn, no matter how they styled themselves, were no true netninja.

At least the room had been created by a human sensibility. She could recognize the desk and the files and the tool box all arranged in the same sequence as came in mid-range commercial software. This was the kind of setup a larger maskmaker might have, perhaps, with unused places for inventory and payroll.

Cecilie had to suppress the desire to giggle. She was at the heart of the great conspiracy and these were the resources of the people who

thought they would bring down the Septs. She could have scrounged and written better over lunch waiting for her soup to cool.

The only thing that stopped her short of complete contempt was David. She had met David in the net, and she knew what he could do. And he could have written better over lunch too, she was certain of that.

She went through the files which were boring and useless. There was nothing at all about the activity of the Children of Dawn, though given what she had seen so far she would not be surprised if their entire activity was setting up this site. There were no records, no address lists, no capture files full of sensitive Sept data. The only thing Cecilie could find were business accounts of something that looked like an importer's.

Cecilie perused the accounts quickly. There was nothing at all untoward on the surface of the records, and to really get into them she would have to spend some serious time, but she didn't expect to have to do that. She thought that probably there was nothing at all amiss with the accounts.

This was Artos Camerillo's business, his uninspired office transported to the Library for some reason. Probably, she suspected, the office was dull because Camerillo didn't put his heart into the business. His passion was music, and maybe the net, but it certainly wasn't importing luxury foodstuffs. Cecilie had barely heard of and had never tasted most of the things on these invoices.

She wanted to leave this place, leave the net entirely and get out of the dreambox. She requested a chrono read and the numbers showed up in blue in the lower left edge of her field of vision. It was almost dinner time and she became aware that she was hungry. But still, she decided to do a quick scan with a filter for the Children of Dawn string before she left. Just to make sure, just to be thorough.

Three items triggered the scan. The first was a bank account, innocuous in itself, but the check record showed a large number of payments made out to Children of Dawn. Cecilie forgot that she was hungry. The other two documents would appear equally ingenuous to someone who was looking for tax purposes or personal credit. There was an appointment tickler with certain dates and trips marked CD. Cecilie immediately transferred that to her own account and then erased the trace that would have shown it to have been copied. Maybe Zizi had included this file in her investigation folder, but she didn't want to take the chance. The familiar was good, but since it had gotten uncanny she didn't entirely trust what it would or could do—and what it wouldn't.

She was excited about the appointments. She might be able to correlate the trips and meetings to other events. Maybe there was some pattern to the movements that would lead to a killer.

Suddenly Cecilie realized that she didn't want David to be the killer, and that was why she had accepted the contract. She wasn't sure why it mattered to her. Maybe just that she had met him and she couldn't bear to think that a murderer wouldn't be marked in some easily recognizable way. There should be something about his speech or his face or his way of sipping coffee that would proclaim that this was a bad person. A killer. A pariah. A person beyond the pale of his humanity.

Beyond humanity. Cecilie whistled through her teeth. That was why the office was here. It had not been put here by the old man or David or some fanatical idiot in the Children of Dawn.

It had been brought here. It was an intact image, abandoned and complete. It must contain much more data about context than they could acquire in a populated area, where things were always changing

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and they had to stay hidden. Here the aliens could take their time to study a complete working system from the subject group.

Cecilie felt dizzy. There was too much and it was too weird and she wanted dinner. She wanted normalcy, she needed Julieta's inane conversation to prove to her that not everyone saw conspiracies in the subterranean dark.

But there was still the third record. She had to at least see what it was before leaving for the day, even though she had a copy safe in her own private files.

The third document that mentioned the Children of Dawn was an insurance claim. Cecilie puzzled over that for a moment and they saved it. She would think better after she had eaten, and she had entree to the Pietà systems tonight. That would solve a number of mysteries, even if they were irrelevant to her investigation. She still needed, wanted to know. Curiosity was a characteristic that had been duly encouraged in her Sept education. Fortunately, so were common sense and a healthy dose of self-preservation.

She did not ignore those two qualities entirely. She left the office, left the library entirely and returned to real life. She had downloaded the appointment book and the insurance claim and could peruse them in text environment while she ate a sandwich and waited for ten-thirty to come.

In the end, I am frightened. The Septs are more than I feared them to be, completely without ethics or concern past their own interests. Most of all I fear Sept Sorian, as I have always known their true place in the hierarchy. Even if it is nearly illegal to think the truth, I cannot help but know. I fear that they will find me and my Children, and destroy us, as they have destroyed all opposition in the past thirty years.

I remember a time when the net was free. When multitudes would go to extreme lengths rather than forfeit that anarchy. When even the most powerful had to abide by prevailing tradition and common usage. Over the years this has deteriorated so that now the Septs run everything of consequence and the rest of us have kiosk accounts where we can spend our money and chat to friends. We appear to be free—so long as we don't try to touch anything that matters.

Cecilie read the old man's words over and over again. She tried to believe that she was wrong and that Camerillo was too. She was infuriated and insulted and afraid that there was more than a shred of truth in the old man's paranoia.

...completely without ethics or concerns past their own interests.

Cecilie shuddered. She knew what had happened to her in even a few weeks. Step by step she had been enticed. She had done things that violated her entire moral center and in so doing she had changed. Things were no longer quite so clear nor so meaningful and she did what she had to do to satisfy the Sept. Doing whatever the Sept required had even begun to feel right to her.

Bit by bit they were changing her. They had created her in the first place, embedding values such as loyalty and the search for truth. Then they twisted those scruples, forcing her to abandon any meaning other than the Sept's.

They had done it well. Cecilie knew that she hadn't felt right, hadn't felt clean, since the day Signora Tima had explained what she had to do to pass her promotion to senior apprentice. She hadn't felt really alive since then. She was all weighted down and wrapped up in some fog of necessity that the Sept had convinced her she would eventually come to accept.

Only she couldn't accept it. Her own acquiescence had sucked the life out of her. Looking at the elders, at the women who had invaded Sept Fortune for the Board meeting, Cecilie knew that none of them seemed fully alive, either.

Even her mother had more vitality, more sparkle, than these privileged and educated elders who appeared utterly enervated. Cecilie wondered if all the wealth, the ski vacations and the elegant beach houses, the large apartments in the Sept House and the retirement House in Hawaii, if all these things made up for becoming part of the conspiracy. She suspected they didn't. Or why would the Septs need this Board meeting, crave even more power than they already wielded and seek to bring the whole world under their sway?

Somehow it made a kind of sense to Cecilie—a sickening, scary sense. There were large pieces missing, and Cecilie realized that she wasn't certain that she wanted to know what those pieces were. Every time she had uncovered new data everything became uglier and more immediate. There was no reason to think that this would change, that the downward spiral would stop suddenly and she would find the light.

They had corrupted her that deeply, she realized wearily. She no longer expected good. She no longer had hope. And she was running out of time.

Cecilie had been inside the Pietà many times, through the grand door that gave on to the stone wharf. Beyond this door was the concert hall with its gilded ornaments and sky blue velvet hangings and its many chandeliers. She had worn her best costumes here and had filed in clutching a program printed on heavy paper, had mingled in the soaring sky-blue lobby with a ceiling painted with bare breasted angels. This had always been a place of hush and awe and pleasure, a symphony for the senses.

Lina did not take her to the familiar door. Instead Lina led her to a much smaller door on the street. Entering here there was no fine art on the ceilings and no gold and silver leaf on the flood stained walls. The smell of dust and chalk and musty robes lingered in the dark. Lina led quickly down the corridor so that Cecilie didn't have a chance to see what was behind the scenes of the Pietà. "Classrooms, rehearsal rooms," Lina said, waving her hand vaguely.

They turned several times and came to an elegant if small parlor with French doors that Lina opened with an old-fashioned key card. "The office," she said with a flourish. She told the lights to come up to two thirds; full bright would have seemed harsh and threatening compared to the shadows through which they had passed.

There were only two work stations. Lina sat down and whispered a series of commands in a sequence that meant nothing at all to Cecilie. It must have been the Pietà's private code set and the text readers looked ancient. Cecilie was certain that they hadn't been replaced since just after the last flood, which had been when she was two years old. Interfaces had improved since then, and besides, these old things looked like antiques.

Well, she thought, at least they fit in with the rest of the office. Everything there was antique, some of it very fine and most of it too scarred and floodstained to have any serious value.

"It's ready for you now," Lina told her, and then got up from the narrow-legged gilt chair that matched nothing else in the room. Cecilie perched on the tapestry seat cautiously and looked at the display.

She was in a file system that resembled no file system she had ever seen before. Slowly, experimentally, she worked her way through the year and the names where Lina had left her. Whoever had kept these

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records had done so in a highly idiosyncratic manner. Without Lina setting her in the correct year and at around the proper placement, Cecilie honestly thought that she might not have been able to find even something fairly easy to access.

"Do you know why these were taken off the net?" she asked Lina casually.

The singer shrugged and looked up from her folio. "I don't know. They said something about our record system being incompatible or something and that the site wouldn't carry anything in an exotic format."

"Yeah, I can see why," Cecilie muttered to herself. "This is a mess." Lina looked up from her sheet music again. "No it isn't. It's organized on the same principle as a symphony, is all. Some of the records, the more personal ones, are structured around other musical forms. But all our serious records are symphonies. That makes it easy for anyone to access them."

Cecilie groaned. She didn't know anything about the structure of symphonies, but what she found really absurd was Lina's naivete. As if just anyone could use the structure of a symphony, indeed!

Suddenly she flashed on the alien catalogs in her mind's eye. Their structure was only somewhat less coherent for them than a musical form of organization. The aliens were completely alien, but that didn't mean that there weren't plenty of her own species right here in Venice who lived in a different world entirely.

Maybe being alien was only a matter of degree.

Suddenly Cecilie wondered if Lina might be closer to understanding the alien archives than a Sept sister could be. Maybe there was something in their patterning that was closer to the organization of music the way Lina had studied it than to a more usual cataloging of information. The idea excited Cecilie. She wanted to ask immediately if Lina would be willing to enter a dreambox with her and go to the alien sites. If Lina couldn't see any underlying structure, Cecilie could find someone else who thought very differently than either of them.

The implications were huge and important. To be able to identify any form of alien organization would mean to begin to communicate. Once they were able to communicate and everyone knew, who knew what then? Even if they could never do more than exchange information, who knew what techniques and technology the aliens had?

Something more than that moved Cecilie to want to act. It was the idea that they were not alone, that there were others other there, wondering, looking, curious, aware. Others so far away that she could not pinpoint their star of origin were aware of humanity. All that humankind were and had been would not be isolated on one single rock and extinguished alone. Something of them would live on elsewhere and someone would notice when humanity as a race died. Maybe someone would even mourn.

It was like imagining her own funeral when she was fifteen, Cecilie thought. It was Valentina's idea to wonder about who would be there and wallow in the image of their grief. Only Cecilie had always thought that when the end came for her species everything would cancel out. That there would be no memory, no grief at their passing. Now, perhaps, that was not true, and that alone was a tremendous comfort.

She couldn't work on the big picture while the smaller one was so urgent. The aliens had been there for a long time and looked fixed to stay. David Gavilli, however, was wearing a tracer bracelet and could not leave the city. David Gavilli was much less important than the

aliens, but his signature was on her contract and now that had to take precedence over the greater revelation.

Besides, she didn't have forever in these records. There was no time to waste. Lina could not hold this open forever. Instead of trying to understand any of the organizational principles, Cecilie merely asked Lina where she would find information on two members' dismissals. Lina asked if she wanted text or visual or interactive. Cecilie decided on text. It would be the fastest format, though she didn't know why she felt so pressed for time. Lina did not seem rushed or worried.

Lina sang a couple of notes and text appeared. Cecilie tried not to appear too overwhelmed. What perfect security for the Pietà! It truly was unbreakable by many of the Septs, which did not include musical training. Cecilie herself could not carry a tune. Some of the Sept sisters at least could hit notes when they wanted to, but Cecilie couldn't conceive of breaking this system alone no matter how much she knew about it—not that it would ever have occurred to her or to anyone in Sept-Portance to use that kind of barrier. She was impressed, the more so because it was so very simple.

No one at the Pietà would have the least problem getting in and no unqualified person could follow or reproduce the code. Oh, maybe if she knew the sequences and got a singer from one of the other choirs she would have a chance. But Cecilie thought it very likely that the choirs would stick together the way the Septs would in the face of an outsider. Just like the Septs they might argue all they like among themselves and treat each other as bitterest enemies and rivals, but no doubt they would close ranks immediately if someone completely outside their system confronted them.

Then Cecilie shook her head to clear it. There was too much to do and very little time. Priorities. She glanced at the text that Lina had brought up and nodded. This was what she had been searching for. She began to read the files avidly.

When she reemerged from the Pietà files it was nearly two in the morning. Cecilie was shocked. She didn't feel like she'd been that engrossed in historical reports that had nothing at all to do with the old man's death. At least, she didn't think they could have any relevance.

Lina was sitting hunched over, her face in her arms and her breathing regular. Asleep, Cecilie thought, and no wonder. She touched the singer lightly on the shoulder and Lina's eyes fluttered.

"Did you get what you want?" the singer asked, her voice slurred with sleep.

"Yes," Cecilie said, not certain it was the full truth.

Lina closed her eyes, leaned back in the chair and stretched. "Then I guess I'd better let you out and you can go home," she said, rising.

Cecilie followed her back through the empty classrooms and rehearsal halls to the small side door. This time the place felt truly dead, as if there were no one alive but the two of them in the whole pile of stone or in the whole of the world.

"You'll be all right?" Lina inquired as she opened the heavy door.

"Sure," Cecilie reassured her. And then Cecilie slipped out into the night.

There were no taxis in this neighborhood. She had to walk several blocks to the vaperetto stand, where she was alone for the full twenty minutes until a small boat came her way. She paid and got in. There were perhaps five other people in the boat, three of them quite definitely drunk. One had had his mask raised over his mouth so he wouldn't vomit into it and choke himself. Cecilie positioned herself as far from them as possible.

The late night rides were slow. She didn't get home until after three and she was exhausted. Her mother was awake when she got in, but Cecilie was too tired to argue. "I'll tell you everything when I get up," she said, staggering off to her own room.

"And what about work?" her mother demanded. "How are you going to get up tomorrow?"

Cecilie shrugged. Right now nothing seemed so important as getting to bed. "I'll go in late. With the Board meeting no one will notice anyway." Then, not listening to anything more, she stumbled into her room and barely pulled off her clothes before she was asleep.

66 **W**here were you last night?" her mother demanded over coffee. It was midmorning and the building was quiet. Everyone was off to work or school and only a few retirees were left. Except for Cecilie and her mother.

"Don't you have to go to work?" she asked.

Her mother sighed and shook her head. "I called in sick this morning because I need to know what you've been doing. I am sick, staying up worrying all night long, wondering if you were murdered or abducted and the police would find you floating in the Grand Canal in the morning."

Cecilie tried not to giggle. "It wasn't anything like that," she said. "I was working late and got involved in what I was doing and lost track of the time, is all. You'd be interested. I was at the Pietà."

Her mother's eyes widened. "The Pietà?"

Cecilie nodded. "I got into their records. And I found out about that scandal that you thought was so romantic."

Conflicting emotions animated her mother's face. "That isn't right," she said finally. "You not have a code of conduct, where you took an oath to the Sept? Those records are private."

Cecilie tried very hard not to laugh. If her mother only knew what the Sept had asked of her, breaking in to records would sound like the most minor infraction. But her mother didn't know. Her mother didn't see the change in her, didn't know the things she had done. To her mother, privacy of Pietà records was sacrosanct. Unless, of course, it was broken by a tabloid journalist.

So Cecilie did the only thing possible. She told the truth. "I didn't break in, I was let in," she said easily. "But if you don't want to know what happened and why those singers were dismissed, I will consider it privileged information."

Her mother turned red and gasped. "Cecilie!" was all she said, but that said it all.

Cecilie giggled. "Yes, mama. Okay. Well, Signora Camerillo was known as Laura Marghetti in her Pietà days. She was a lead singer with a special flair for opera. And Longi was also a lead singer with an even bigger reputation at the time. Anyway, they were both introduced to jazz through the elder Camerillo brother, Longi's lover. He also played keyboard and loved jazz. They met him at the Pietà where he was a rehearsal accompanist. The younger brother was a musician too, by the way, played the drums. The four of them began performing new music and drawing pretty serious crowds given the Pietà reputation."

"There were a lot of venues in those days and they were very popular. That's where a good bit of the Camerillo money came from, it turns out. That isn't important. What is important is that they were asked to stop. Sept Sorian asked them to stop, and not too politely if the I read between the lines.

"It's all in the records, right down to the scans of the handwritten Sept Sorian notes that sound like demands written by criminal or kidnappers, not a reasonable request to a choir."

"That's absurd," her mother interrupted. "The Septs don't have anything to do with the choirs."

Cecilie blinked. It was not possible that her mother was so naive. "Of course the Septs have everything to do with the choirs," she said, wondering if she was going to have to spell it all out. "The Septs have supported the choirs from the beginning, from when it was first proven that certain forms of music increase intelligence and effective thought. It has to do with the erg cycles of the brain. The work of certain composers enhances those cycles."

"And it has never been proven that any other music makes you stupid," she continued. "But the Septs worry about that. There was a study done around the time that this jazz group was getting popular, though, that different kinds of music do affect the patterning in the brain that dictates behavior and that some of the forms of music were directly associated with how people regard authority. Someone wrote a study that jazz made people more independent and that rock made them more aggressive. I'm not sure that the study even was done at all, let alone that it was valid. But it is still quoted to this day."

"So the Septs have always paid the choirs to keep us working at top efficiency and the Septs have been very influential in choosing the music. That is the reason that Mozart is so popular with the choir recitals and rock and jazz are discouraged in the city."

"It's usually Sept Sorian's duty to deal with these matters. Their speciality isn't really the net-work. They're more generalists and they tend to take care of a lot of the real life interface for the Sept Board. When the Board agrees on anything, which usually they don't. Like now. It makes sense that Sept Sorian took care of the matter."

"They threatened the Pietà financially, said that unless the jazz players were not only dismissed but discredited the choir would no longer receive Sept patronage. Believe me, Mama, that counts for the main share of their revenue. I've done the accounting and I know."

"And that wasn't all. There are provisions that the four of them would not play in public together again."

"And what did they get for that?" her mother asked.

Cecilie chewed her lip. She hadn't realized it before, but now it was obvious what had been missing from the record. The quid pro quo for the singers' silence was not delineated. There must have been something, something that would really hold them. Because from everything else Cecilie had accessed, they had indeed lived by the terms of the agreement.

"Perhaps money," her mother mused. "People will do a lot for enough money."

Cecilie jumped up and hugged her mother. "That's it, that's got to be it. I've been trying to find out where the money came from."

Her mother only smiled. "You've been working too hard and staying out too late. And probably not eating proper dinners, either, when you're not home. I know there's a nice dinner at the House and I'm certain that isn't where you were. You have to slow down a little Cecilie. Have some life. Enjoy everything you can. You're young, you're beautiful, you can't live just to work. That will keep until you're older. There is always work and finances and advancement. Now you need to sleep more and go to parties and have fun. And eat. You're not eating enough, I can tell."

Cecilie shook her head as her mother set another roll and butter in front of her. There was no resisting, and though she wasn't hungry she buttered the bread and broke it and nibbled at the crust. Eating

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relieved her of talking, which meant that she could think more effectively.

The Camerillo money had been the settlement for the end of the jazz band. They had been making decent money all along, so it would have had to have been a substantial sum. But this was back in her territory and Cecilie knew how to find exactly how much had been paid out.

So it came to both sides of the family and eventually all to the only heir, Artos. She had done a full day's work in an hour. Maybe her mother had done half of it for her, she wasn't sure, but sometimes she was proud that her mother was so smart.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Lina only got four hours of sleep. She was on the early shift at the Board and she cursed as the alarm woke her. The night with Cecilie had been miserably long and she was still cramped from hours dozing in the desk chair. She had forgotten that she had the early session.

She stood under a torrent of hot water hoping that it would help her wake up. Cold would do a better job but she couldn't even face tepid on a normal day. Exhausted as she was she couldn't consider the idea without far more misery than it was worth.

Getting dressed was an ordeal. She wore the usual Pietà blue robes and the Pietà mask that left her nose and mouth free to sing, but it took her at least ten minutes to decide what to wear under the robe.

Her hair looked awful but that didn't matter. The traditional Pietà turban that matched the robe would hide it, though usually she liked to wear her hair down, flowing over her back with the turban on top. She was often criticized for that. The idea of the robes and masks was that all the singers looked perfectly alike. One could not be told from another. She knew she should keep her identity decently concealed, but the hair was a fashion statement and had become popular with men and women alike. It had been quite daring on the streets two years ago, and the Pietà did have a reputation to maintain. These days only old stick-in-the-muds like the Maestro or the Sept members would refuse to ever show a lock of hair in costume.

Maestro was fighting a losing battle as more and more singers showed off their tresses. One day after she had heard the argument for anonymity for the third time in an afternoon, she suggested that a fall be attached to all the turbans of singers who didn't have beautiful hair to display. That shut the questioner up quickly.

Today, though, she wound her hair on top of her head and pinned it so that it wouldn't fall out of the headress. No one would see that she was bleary-eyed and that her skin was pasty. There were definite advantages to wearing a mask.

She couldn't wear the mask to breakfast, though, and it dangled from the little invisible hook inside her large sleeve that was made for the purpose. Everyone could see that she looked like she could barely make it through breakfast, let alone to perform a full program for the Board.

At least there was plenty of coffee. The breakfast room was laid as always, with the giant coffee urns on both sides of the table full of baskets of bread and sweet rolls. Normally Lina took one cup of coffee and bread and butter. Today she went back to the big urn twice and took two of the breakfast pastries with lemon curd. Between the coffee and the sugar she might possibly get through the morning.

She resented it even as she finished up and prepared to leave with the group. The early choir wasn't very important. Very few Board members arrived for the breakfast or to work out alliances before the meetings began. Most of that was done late at night and under the influences of varied and unregulated music.

Lina hated the fact that she had to wake up early, had to perform complex and inspiring music for only a few who drifted in and couldn't care less that their mental and emotional needs were being as carefully coddled as their physical requirements. No, these arrogant Board members would talk to each other loudly, as if the music meant nothing to them. They would rattle their coffee cups and spoons, ask for jam or butter and generally ignore the delicacy of expression Maestro had worked so hard to achieve.

And that was only the ones who came. Most of them didn't. After the night Lina had spent, she wanted nothing more than to absent herself from the whole meeting. Forever. She wanted only to sleep and never to see the inside of another Sept function again.

If her pride would not let her ask to be excused, all the traditions of the stage were on their side. Those traditions meant that she had to perform no matter how she felt, even if she were dying. She had heard of an opera production where three different tenors had sung in three different acts because the first two had died as the curtain went down.

She trailed the group as they got into the choir vaperetto and took the last place to stand.

"Did she come last night? Did you do it?" someone whispered to her from behind a mask.

She recognized the voice and started hard enough that she was practically awake. It was Sean.

"What are you doing here?" she hissed at him.

He smiled, slow and sardonic. "Yves was taken sick early this morning and rushed to the hospital. I suppose you didn't hear the commotion? No, of course not, you're in the far building. They needed another tenor who knew the music. So here I am. For the duration, it looks like."

"What did you do to Yves?" Lina asked.

"What do you mean, what did I do?" Sean asked, his voice full of wounded innocence. "Yves has acute appendicitis. Believe me, no matter how good I am I can't pull that one off. He'll be back home tonight or tomorrow but he won't be able to sing for a week. That's what Maestro told me when he asked me to take Yves' place."

"You mean when you volunteered to take his place," Lina corrected him.

Sean shrugged but the gesture was nearly lost beneath the yards of robe. "I'll admit to that much. But you didn't answer my question about the Sept sister. Did she get in? Did she get the information?"

Lina closed her eyes and wondered why she had agreed to help him. She had liked Cecilie and trusted her in a way she didn't trust Sean.

"Yes," Lina admitted, looking at the choppy grey water so she didn't have to look at Sean's face. Even with the mask she was sure she couldn't avoid his arrogance.

"Good," he said, turning to the water himself. "David will be pleased. You've been very useful, you won't regret it."

Lina decided not to tell him that she already did regret it; she hated the idea of helping him even if he was right. And she wasn't so sure he was right. If Cecilie hadn't been so certain Lina would have let it drop. After all, things like the Septs taking over the net had no effect on her life. Why should she risk herself, her position in the choir, her whole future, for something she didn't think would matter?

Absolute Magnitude

But Cecile had changed her mind, far more than Sean, more even than the jazz. Cecile, and the things she had heard and overheard from the Board meeting. The bits of conversation she picked up during her breaks were alarming. She had realized how often there was one more whisper, a glance over a shoulder or towards the door, the tiny gestures that spoke of secrecy among certain of the Board members.

The boat arrived at the dock. Lina stood up straighter to live up to the image of the Pietà singers. They were a long, proud lineage, never seen to be weak or unable to perform, inviolate acolytes of their muse and serving none other.

Though they had always served the Septs and always would do so, Lina thought. Unless something happened. Unless they all learned to be free again.

They marched into the great chamber and took their places on the risers that made a backdrop for the main panel of speakers. Before the Sept sisters and brother arrived the main hall was impressive. Above, the ceiling was coffered in gilt with frescoed panels. Two walls were papered in the rich, Oriental green that was often thought of as Venetian. The other two walls were covered with paintings, allegories of the four seasons divided by carved mahogany moldings.

This morning Lina noticed nothing. It was hard enough to just stay awake. She opened her folio, though of course she knew the music by heart. The only thing she noticed was when Maestro brought his baton down.

Two hours later she staggered out for coffee. The buffet room was as elegantly set as before, but food didn't tempt Lina. Her stomach churned both from her conversation with Sean and her only partially successful attempt to counteract the long night. The place was stuffy and crowded—in the past twenty minutes most of the Board members had arrived. Lina glanced at the ornolu clock that sat on an oversized mantelpiece and it already read nine. No wonder everyone was already here, she hadn't realized that so much time had passed.

She took another espresso and sat down on one of the narrow chairs upholstered in antique green velvet. It was miserably uncomfortable, made for ladies with big skirts to perch on rather than for exhausted singers to make up a lost night's sleep. She was staring deep into her cup in a daze when she heard a very soft voice just behind her.

"You really should be more careful of your security," said a man in a dark red mask. Lighter red twinkled around his left eye, subtly and not overdone. The work of a master maskmaker, Lina noted dully.

"Sept Sorian has already guaranteed Pietà security," the man continued. "But what you compromise cannot be guaranteed in the future. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Lina muttered, not sure exactly what she had heard. Compromised security? What did a Sept have to do with it, anyway? Her brain was fuzzy and moving slowly. The man in the dark red mask disappeared and Lina forgot about him. She finished her

espresso and returned to the hall for another hour of singing before her next break. It wasn't until they filed off the risers for the second time that she realized she couldn't spot Sean.

He probably was there and she was just too tired to pay attention. That happened when she didn't get enough sleep. She missed things and couldn't think.

It didn't matter, she told herself. Sean was there. Maybe he was further to the right than she had realized. Maybe he had ducked into the rest room before they got to the buffet room. She was being silly, that was all.

She felt a hand on her shoulder and herself steered away from the food. "What?" she started to ask.

"You little idiot," a voice hissed. She heard his voice and his accent and recognized her abductor, the foreign Sept brother who had spoken to her so pleasantly the day after the meetings had opened. Only now he wore a refined mask in a subtle pattern of midnight blue and indigo, with a matching costume and all his hair tucked into his turban.

He didn't let go of her, but pushed her through the narrow back hallway through the old-fashioned cloakroom and down the back stairs.

"What are you doing?" Lina demanded, holding the newel post against being dragged any further.

"Saving your life, you stupid little chicken," the Sept brother whispered in her ear. "That was Tano, the chief of security at Sept Sorian. Talk about someone who's attention you don't want to attract. Now come along with me as if you meant to show me where to buy some souvenirs or something, like it was the most natural thing in the world."

Lina was too tired to hesitate or even evaluate rationally. It was simply easier to go along with the Sept brother than try to fight to get back upstairs. Besides, the second sopranos had only a tiny part in the upcoming section and she didn't know how she was going to manage to stay awake for

two hours to sing for three minutes.

He never let go of her arm. Even through the heavy fabric she could feel the insistence of his grip. They walked several blocks to the public vaperetto stop. There they paid the fare and boarded in the middle of a Japanese tour group, who stared at them. Yes, indeed, a Pietà singer and a Board member abroad on public transportation were very interesting sights indeed and the tourists spent the entire ride taking pictures and grouping this or that family member with these friends with the masked Venetians.

They disembarked near the Basilica. The tour guide seemed to have some trouble getting her group to follow the planned program instead of taking off after the local celebrities in their midst—or at least getting pictures of their typical costumes.

They walked briskly. The Sept brother led her wildly through the streets in such an order that she could not have recreated the route. Finally they came to a once-fine but now crumbling palazzo on a back canal. They didn't go in through the main door, which was to the water, but through a small service door on the side.



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What little she saw of the entrance floor looked to have been badly affected by flood damage, but she didn't get to see much. Her kidnapper—or rescuer—steered her up the back stairs and then through what had once been a servant's corridor to an upstairs parlor.

Even unaware as she was, she realized that the furnishings showed both good taste and originality. None of the usual gilt and moire adorned the plain surfaces. It reminded her almost of the Luna Cafe, only the chairs were elegantly covered and abstract canvasses hung on the oversized block walls.

In the corner a man waited. Lina recognized him, too, from the Luna. He was one of the musicians. He was unmasked, which made sense if this was his own home, and appeared at ease. His hair was dark brown and his features were cosmetically perfect but not particularly interesting. Lina recognized the results of the more popular forms of surgery from those places where people didn't mask. She thought it a pity, really. Masking meant that Venetians could remain themselves beneath the masks instead of pretending they were barefaced and honest. When in truth everyone masked and those who learned to do it with their faces showing to the world were merely creating another mask, a more dangerous one.

The man rose gracefully and held out his hand to her. "I am David Gavrilii," he introduced himself, and his voice was deep and musical. Lina wondered if he could sing.

"Sean has told me a great deal about you," he continued. "You've helped us greatly, so we couldn't leave you in danger."

"I'm not in danger," Lina said.

"I'd better go before I'm missed," the Sept brother told them. David nodded and the foreign brother left.

Lina slumped down on one of the chairs uninvited. She was tired and she was a Pietà singer so she was used to the privilege. David merely sat beside her.

"What is this?" she asked. "I went along, but I could really use an explanation. Or I'll leave now."

David did not try to restrain her. "Sean told me what you did for Cecile last night," he said. "We owe you. You might not have wanted to help us as such, but you have. And when your actions came to the attention of Sept Sorian we had to take steps to protect you."

"But they're just a Sept," Lina protested.

David shrugged. "They are dangerous," he replied. "We don't know what their connections are, but it's better that you're out of there for awhile. At least until after the meetings are over."

"I can't," Lina said. "I'm in the Board choir, it's a special position. I can't just disappear, it will be noticed."

David hesitated. When he finally spoke his voice was not nearly so authoritative as he had been before. "Why not stay here today and tonight? You are too tired anyway, and your shift for the day was almost done. So wait until you are rested and can evaluate the situation properly, with a clear head. We have a lovely guest room set up for you."

Lina nodded. She would have agreed to almost anything to go to sleep. David led her to an airy bedroom full of flowered prints in soft greyed pastels. A fresh night gown had been laid at the bottom of the bed, crisp white cotton edged in lace. David opened the door and she cared about nothing at all except sleep.

No matter what her mother recommended, Cecile did not stay home all day. She had to report her findings to her employer, and check that he sent the payment due. She still hadn't found the killer but she was close. She could feel it, she could smell it. She knew she was

close the way she had always known before when she had first learned to do data searches through the whole of the infosea.

Others would get lost and they were the ones who did not last. The next morning a place would be empty at breakfast and even the littlest girls knew that someone had failed. Then there were those like Valentina and Julietta, who had a specific plan of action and could negotiate through the dataflow by diligence and organized force.

And then there was Cecile, who had somehow found ways to pick through and come to a final comprehension without knowing quite how she'd done it. It was intuitive talent, Signora Angelina had said, but that didn't mean that Cecile didn't need to study and learn the same techniques as the others. Talent alone was useless without training and discipline and lots of hard work.

That Talent was even more useless without a dreambox.

At least the House was deserted when Cecile arrived. All the delegates were likely off at the Board, and everyone else was in their cubicles. She didn't see anyone as she crossed the Main Hall and passed the girls' school before entering the Chinese Corridor. Everyone in the Sept could be dead, and the thought didn't disturb Cecile much at all.

She didn't bother checking her mail in text. What was there could wait; she had better things to do.

She lay down on the dreambox and hooked in the leads. The cover lowered and colored, first a pale blue swirled with green and violet and then blanked into red. Then she saw the Library form around her, in flat two-D before the connection solidified and she transferred consciousness completely to the net.

Only things had changed in the Library. Someone was sitting in her usual spot at the table reserved for Sept Fortune and this was not a sister of the Sept. For one thing, the figure was male.

Nor was it anyone she knew. He looked at her and gestured for her to be seated. There was something about him, even here, that she didn't like. His costume was usual enough, a harlequin in black and orange, the colors of Sept Sorian. He seemed neither imposing nor strange and showed none of the signs she had learned to suspect when she was inside. Yet, just the fact that he sat at her table in the Sept Sorian colors frightened her. She sat down facing him and neither of them unmasked.

"Little sister," he said slowly, "you are very young and very naive. We know that and we are willing to make allowances for these things. But you should know when to retreat, when it is better not to know things. Your teachers should have instructed you. Sometimes you cannot know the whole story. Sometimes it is better for things to remain silent, to remain buried. Do you understand?"

Looking at the cold eyes that no mask could hide, she did understand. She understood all too well.

"Someone innocent should not pay," she replied.

"No one innocent ever pays," the Sept Sorian brother told her. "The one you were hired to clear, to protect, he is not innocent. He may not have killed Artos Camerillo, but he certainly is not innocent. You will have to trust us. And trust that his—elimination—is also to our benefit. All of our benefit."

Cecile felt frozen, as if the ice in this brother had reached out and chilled her as well. "I understand you," she said.

"Good," he said. "You will let this matter drop completely. Your superiors will be informed."

He got up and walked out of the reading room. Cecile moved around to her usual chair, which he had taken. She looked down and then the tears came.

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Zizi lay twisted and broken on the floor. No matter that it had just been a program, and one she had created. It had still been her familiar, warm and friendly and part of her world. That small body with its neck crushed and feathers strewn about the legs of the chair was a threat that was more cruel and telling than anything the brother had said.

Cecilie realized that she was crying. She hoped that her library mask held, that no one else could see her tears. How could he have hurt her familiar? The bird-construct had done nothing at all.

Oh, she understood all too well and it made too much sense. Everything fell neatly into place. What the singers had gotten that was not listed became clear. They had been allowed to live. As Artos Camerillo had not. As Zizi had not.

As she would not if she reported her findings to David.

Information was power. But Sept Sorian wasn't stopping at information, and hadn't stopped there for a long time. Now the Board just wanted to go public with the arrangement, and force the Septs into some kind of cohesive whole so that Sept Sorian could keep them in line as well.

Once upon a time she had learned that the Septs, being systems experts, were helpers to all humanity. She had believed those stories, had been proud of her contribution. All the promises of wealth and privilege hadn't made her proud of her vocation. Then she had been so full of righteousness, of moral fervor. She had been so stupid. She had been so wrong.

Now Sept Sorian would kill her, too, the way they disposed of anyone who got in their way. Cecilie wondered if that was what Signora Tima and the sisters from San Francisco and the other major houses had discussed in their private meeting. While Cecilie could easily believe that Signora Tima was out to take over everything, she would take it for Sept-Fortune. There was no love lost between Signora Tima and the bullying brothers who tried to force her hand.

Gently Cecilie picked up the pieces of Zizi that were scattered on the floor. The body had weight and there was still a little warmth—she had been so pleased at how well it had mimicked real life. She gathered the feathers into a pile. There were the long curving feathers of the tail and the crest, the near iridescent flight feathers.

She would never make anything like it again, she swore. It was stupid to be so attached to a program. Why had the brother killed it? It was only a familiar, a funny, useful thing that every Sept sister and brother had.

Zizi's demise might not have been entirely symbolic. The familiar might have discovered something. If it had unearthed something it would have downloaded before arriving at the Library. She had written that in when she was very young, before she could trust Zizi's effectiveness in finding her.

She could regenerate her familiar if she decided to. The idea of living without Zizi was bleak and humorless and she could not bear being without it. Much as she did not like to admit it, she was very fond of her virtual bird. But that decision could wait; what Zizi might have gathered could not.

Now that she knew the reading room was not safe she had to find someplace where a brother of Sept Sorian wouldn't look for her. There had to be someplace where she could just disappear. She was certain that Sept Sorian had passive telltales on all the level entries in the net. That must be how they knew she had arrived in the Library which meant that she had to slip a level or two without going through any of the approved gates.

Well, there was the story that all water on every level was entry to the infosea, if only one had the courage to enter it. Cecilie knew of only one body of water large enough for immersion on this level. Grimly she made herself leave the library and cross the few blocks to the Mall. The Mall was the last place in the universe where she wanted to be right now. She wanted to be alone, to mourn and to cry and to be afraid and think and eat ice cream while she took a time out from life. Only in real life there were no time outs, and virtual ice cream was useless, she reminded herself. Though it wasn't fattening, as Julietta always reminded them.

At least the Mall was in its white pseudo-classical phase. She couldn't have borne the neon, or anything too cheerful. As it was, she felt that her slow pace and hunched posture must make her obvious among the chattering, shopping crowd. They were all so happy, so oblivious to what was around them, that she wanted to hammer their virtual heads through the illusory plate glass.

She ignored all the shops, the piles of colored goods stacked seductively in the entry ways, the sales people and pitches every three meters. She stayed on the main level and headed inward to the center, to the big fountain.

In pseudo-Classical phase, the fountain was half surrounded by a pillared arcade. There were stairs leading into the basin as if this were some nyad's pool. Cecilie sat on the marble ledge and dipped her hand into the water. From this perspective she could tell nothing. Maybe the blue floor was really just a floor and no one could use this place to change.

She swung her legs over the ledge so that her feet were on the steps, squarely in the water. She began to walk down. There were only five steps and she was on the bottom. It was barely to her knees.

"Wait, get out of there, you can't go in there."

She turned. A uniformed security guard was running toward her. She knelt down and then held her breath and ducked her head under so she was completely immersed. For a moment the blue bottom and white steps of the fountain in the middle of the Mall lingered, and then opened out into the whole of the infosea.

There was very little here. The Mall was a wasteland on the inner levels. Experimentally, Cecilie kicked out and headed for a darker eddy she could see nearby. Most likely the Library analog on this level, though she had always seen the image before as a brilliant sparkling green reef abundant with life.

This was swirling indigo like the deepest and most secret parts of the level. Nothing seemed alive in there, though glints of light were visible in the whirlpool. Everything spindled downward. Cecilie wondered if it was the aliens, sucking all the life and knowledge from the net, from humanity. In the end they'd be left with nothing, a structure that was perfectly clear and void.

There were quiet pools near enough the eddy that she could see, but far enough that she would not be dragged down. Cecilie found one with a marker buoy and clung to it, afraid of being dragged into the maelstrom. As she caught her breath and adjusted to the quiet pool she realized that she was not alone. There were other things there, tethered to the buoy, data present on a site.

She looked more carefully. It was an oddball assortment. There was part of a working office that looked vaguely familiar, a ballet dancer, a baby whale, a swirl of autumn leaves and what appeared to be an entire field of tulips. Some of the things were more familiar, the Mall in each of its phases, the flavor list from a nearby ice-cream parlor, sidewalk stones, street signs and an assortment of vehicles,

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many of which Cecilie couldn't name. At least there was some basic sense in the collection.

There were a few animals grouped together, too, net constructs, things that didn't exist in nature. Unicorns and griffins, dragons and basilisks had been among the first things created for profit as well as pleasure. And at the bottom of the heap Cecilie saw a shade of iridescent blue that she knew only too well. No, whoever was here couldn't be that cruel. She couldn't avoid looking to be certain, knowing that she was right. Though she couldn't have been anything other than right.

It was Zizi, as she had found it lying on the reading room floor. The sight of that broken little body made her sob with unrecognized grief. She reached out and the image wavered in the medium. It was not the real Zizi, her Zizi, merely a recollection of him. Somehow that made it easier.

She felt as if someone were watching her curiously but benignly. There was no figure she could make out, but on this level that didn't matter.

The collection in front of her had changed, and this time there were no familiar things, no ice-cream lists or bird familiars. She was thankful for that and wondered if whomever had placed Zizi there in the first place felt badly about that. Now there were only people, faces that she couldn't recognize for the most part. In each face field there was an icon. Some of the icons denoted Septs, some nationalities, and some were family crests. She gestured to the icons with her eyes and the whole thing shifted quickly. Now the people were sorted by icon.

Cecilie went through and touched the Sept icons. She didn't know why, it seemed very silly and yet important. The other groupings disappeared, and now she had an arrangement of Septs. She was surrounded by all the familiar symbols for Sept Fortune and Sept San Marco and those foreign Septs she couldn't pronounce correctly. And in the center, larger than the others, was Sept Sorian.

She stared at the arrangement. Something glittered on the buoy and resolved into a crude Harlequin shape. She understood. This was one of the aliens. It was trying to communicate with her, though whether it was trying to tell her something or ask she couldn't comprehend. But this time it had come with far more organization than she had seen before in the rooms, or some organization that she could follow. Obviously it was learning something, grouping data in meaningful ways.

It was trying to communicate, in as close to her language as it could manage. The event would have been amazing, historic, had she not been so sunk in her own concerns. She gestured towards the dark whirlpool. "The Library," she said, feeling foolish, knowing that her words were incomprehensible and yet not comfortable without them. "There's a lot more there once you know how to use the resources."

The glitter turned dark and ominous and suddenly there was a shimmer throughout the quiet pool, and she was encased in a bubble that was tied to the buoy along with all the rest of the collection. Gingerly she tested the bonds. They dissolved when she pulled them. Not real, then, either, and not meant to be more than an impression here.

That was communication, she realized, but she didn't know what it meant. Did it mean the alien didn't want her to go or did it mean there was danger where she was headed? Or did it merely want her—or her image—for its collection, and it was asking politely?

The whirlpool was getting darker, and streaked into the idigo were long plumes of red. She found herself pushed from the pool, propelled through the datastream into a fast-moving current and

hurried down that to the nearest exit. Whatever had brought her had not given her any choice and so her focus was suddenly thrust back into her cubicle where the surround screen of her dreambox went blank.

There were no exit codes. That had never happened before. It seemed as if the box were dead or had been disconnected. The top swung up too easily, as if detached from the controls.

Cecilie was afraid. She'd never heard of anything vaguely like this happening before. Something was very wrong. She slipped off the dreambox and crouched at the base. There was no place to hide in the cubicle.

That was ridiculous. Why should she think of hiding in her own Sept House? She belonged here, she was safe. It was absurd to think otherwise.

Slowly she straightened up and forced herself to walk to her door. She didn't hear anything and opened the door onto the Chinese corridor. There was nothing there.

The tension stayed with her. She was almost halfway down the hall when she heard something that sounded like marching. Heavy steps muffled by thick carpet carried through the floor, steps that were never made by a Sept sister in expensive pumps or athletic shoes.

Cecilie glanced around quickly for someplace to hide. Glad for once she was in the Chinese corridor, Cecilie climbed onto a bench and into one of the flanking porcelain jugs. Once upon a time, when she'd first been assigned a cubicle here, she and Julietta and Valentina had played hide and seek down the hallway. It had been a very long time ago and she had grown since, but the jars had been more than spacious. She hoped she fit now.

She folded herself down and found that, while her legs were cramped, she could crouch low enough to remain hidden. She couldn't see anything and that made her more nervous. It also made her feel sillier, if that was possible. Hiding in the Chinese jars was something the little girls did and outgrew by the time they were old enough to wear blazers.

Well, she thought, if it's one of our own Sept sisters, I can always say I'm playing with the little ones. It won't go over well but at least it's believable. I hope.

"This really isn't necessary," heard a familiar voice say. "This is her cubicle, but honestly, I think that you could give us the courtesy to take care of our own. We wouldn't presume in your House. And even your Sept doesn't have authority over us."

Signora Tina was speaking, Cecilie realized with a start.

"That will all change very soon, Signora," a man said. His voice was also familiar and made Cecilie's stomach clench. The Library, that was where she had heard his voice. He had threatened her. He had killed Zizi. Fury fought with fear and it was all she could do to stay inside the painted porcelain jar. But she ignored the emotions to listen to the conversation, which she thought had to be about her.

"We have the mandate from the Board's Advisory Committee. It is unfortunate that one of your apprentices got mixed up with these rebels, and certainly the Board does not hold Sept Fortune responsible. We have all had our troubles, which is why we're here to help you. Just as we know you would help us if the situation called for your expertise."

Signora Tina sighed hard. Cecilie had heard that sound many times after a serious disappointment or an apprentice's extreme stupidity. "This is her cubicle. I can't stop you."

They would know she was not there. Cecilie was rigid with fear. Any reasonable person would look in the jugs, they were too obvious

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to overlook. Not a single girl who entered Sept Fortune ever ignored them.

"Cecilie, get out of there and get out of here now," Signora Tima hissed over the lip of the jar. "I can hold them for a minute or two in your cubicle, but you have to get out of here. Now!"

Cecilie didn't hesitate to do as she was told. She pulled herself up and stepped onto the bench and then ran down the middle of the carpet while Signora Tima entered her cubicle. To talk to the Sept brothers who were looking to kill her.

She took the side door, the closest one, and tried to get lost on the street. But she hadn't brought a mask and here she was face-naked in the quiet Sept district.

She ran toward the vaporito stop. This time of day there should be a crowd waiting for the next boat and there was. She had never been grateful that she was petite and looked much younger than her classmates. On this dock she was just another one of the schoolgirls who were waiting to go home for lunch.

The crowded vehicle crossed the grey water and Cecilie thought only of salvation on the other side. She wanted to go home where there had always been safety. Her mother making shrimp for lunch and she could go to her own room with her soft sheets and the blankets she could pull over head against the closet monster. Against Sept Sorian.

Then she realized just how crazy that was. Sept Sorian would already have her home address. They might be waiting for her and they might threaten her parents. They might even kill her parents. She couldn't go there.

She couldn't go anywhere. No place was safe. She wanted to sit down on the corner and cry. She wanted to be a little girl again and safe, believing that there was only good and honor in her world.

Wishing didn't help. She had to find someplace to go.

If only she knew where David lived. Not because she wanted to run to him, but because she wanted to kill him. This whole mess was his fault. If he hadn't hired her she would be just like Julietta and Valentina, happily working away as Sept sisters and waiting until their own day to reach the Board.

That wasn't really true, either, and she knew it. She had never been like Valentina and Julietta and she would never have forgotten the things she had been asked to do. In the end she would have discovered the deceptions and would have been in the same position. Only then she might have been older and more knowledgeable and had some idea of where to go.

All this time as she had considered and let herself be afraid, she had wandered through the streets of Venice. She had left the Ghetto and gone through the older sections away from where the tourists went. Now she glanced up and found that she recognized where she was. This coffee shop was the one she had stopped in with David. She was near the Luna Cafe.

By daylight the neighborhood was drab. Stains ran down the facades of buildings and people yelled in the street in uneducated accents. The coffee shop looked sad, the sandwiches wilted and the jars on the counter scared. The few men standing with their coffee

cups looked drawn and grey. Cecilie looked through the window and found it too depressing.

She walked on to the Luna Cafe, though there was no good reason to go there. The place would be closed now, she knew. But it was one of the only places she knew where she could go, where she didn't think Sept Sorian wouldn't connect her. Maybe the bored ticket taker would be there and he would take pity on her. Not likely, but her brain was frozen and she felt numb.

In daylight the heavy black door was closed and forbidding. The whole building looked like an abandoned garage. Probably there never had been anyone there at all, and she had only dreamed the jazz. She stood and looked and turned away without knocking.

"You looking for Benno?" a woman yelled at her from an upper window across the street. "He's eating lunch, I'll send him right down."

Cecilie started. The woman didn't seem to expect an answer. Cecilie didn't even get a good look at her, only that she was wearing a faded pink kerchief on her head and a house dress that matched. The old woman looked as grey and stained as the neighborhood.

Cecilie sagged against the door and wondered about Benno, and if she should stay or bolt again. Maybe Benno was Sept Sorian? No, that was completely ridiculous. No Sept brother or sister would be down in this place, let alone known to a woman in a worn pink house dress who lived on this street. If any of the sisters in Sept Fortune had come from such a background, her parents would have been moved to a proper place years before. Sept Sorian couldn't be that different.

As Cecilie considered her lack of options, the ticket-taker appeared in the shadows of the entryway across the street. "Yeah, what do you want?" he asked her, wiping a bit of orange soup from the corner of his mouth.

"I, I needed a place to go for a few minutes," Cecilie improvised. "There's something happening and I need help."

Benno turned away without a word. Cecilie slumped against the pavement and the tears started. She couldn't stop and she couldn't help herself, and she had no idea of where else to go.

The woman poked her head out the window again. "You want some soup, girl? That boy of mine, I taught him manners. But he's like any man, his brain goes null when a woman cries. Come on up, apartment thirty-one."

Cecilie went into the dark entry way. She found that the light had been broken and there was no security gate on the door that stuck half-way open. She walked up the stairs, long dark flights where only every other fixture worked. The landlord here was cheap and so there were shadows and the smell of mold and old dinners everywhere.

When she got to the door with 31 painted in chipped cream on dark brown, Benno opened the door before she had a chance to knock. "I don't know what's going on," he muttered to her. "But if you even think of ripping off my mother, you're gonna turn into ribbons. Promise."

Cecilie had no doubts that he meant it. She slipped by him into the large kitchen where the woman in the pink kerchief ladled soup into



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a chipped plate with tiny blue flowers painted around the rim. In this kitchen Sept Sorian did not exist. Here there was only calm and peace, the mingled smells of lemon cleaning liquid and rich lentil soup.

The woman sat down opposite her and smiled. "Eat, baby, you're too thin," she said. "And whatever is making you cry like that, it won't look so bad with some nice hot soup in you, and some chocolates afterwards if you finish it all up. And then you can tell me what terrible thing was making you so upset."

Cecilie finished her soup in silence. The woman was right. The bright tranquility of the well-scrubbed kitchen and the simple meal, as tasty as anything she'd ever had prepared by the Sept chefs, did comfort her. She wanted to tell this plain woman with reddened hands all about her betrayal and pursuit and she knew she couldn't. Those things did not belong in this world. Even the words in her mind hardly made sense so far out of context.

What seemed reasonable, logical, even normal in the Sept House with its dark corners and silent corridors was absurd now. This woman might well believe her, but would not be able to comprehend the reality. Even Cecilie found it difficult to acknowledge reality here. It belonged to some other level of existence, some other universe. Maybe where the aliens belonged it made sense. But not here with the sun shining on the basil pot that sat on the windowsill.

So Cecilie spent her time eating figuring out a way of saying something that might get her some real help within the confines of possibility in this neighborhood. Something with no Septs, no betrayals of trust, no stalking the innocent and no Board trying to take over the world, all of which sounded completely insane right here.

"I need to find this musician who was playing with the jazz band that sometimes plays at the Luna," she said. "He has to help me. There's nowhere else to go."

"He got you in trouble?" the woman asked sympathetically.

"Yes," Cecilie whispered, thinking just how true that was.

"Benno can find him. Benno knows all the musicians," the woman mused. "But what about your mother? Have you told her? She might help you."

"I can't," Cecilie said. "I don't dare even go home now. I'm afraid. I couldn't stay there. I need someplace to stay, someplace no one except maybe David can find me. I don't know, maybe I shouldn't see him, either."

The woman patted Cecilie's hand. "It's not so bad, really. You should see him. He has the right to know. But if you can't go home, at least not now, and you don't know how to talk to your mother, there are people who can help. I know that when the Melio girls in trouble like you are she went to the nuns at Holy Innocents in Padua. Let me see, I should be able to send them mail and we'll know if there's a place for you."

"No," Cecilie protested. The idea of spending time in a charity hostel for unwed mothers insulted her. But then she realized it was a perfect hiding place. Sept Sorian would never look for her there. No one would ever look for her there. It was perfect.

She thought fast. "I don't want anyone to know where I am right now, and if you mail from here someone might guess."

The woman smiled. "I'll ask Benno to ask Father Alberto to mail from the church, under the seal. How would that be?"

Cecilie smiled. "Thank you," she said, with profound gratitude. The seal of the Church was one thing the Septs didn't violate. Even Sept Sorian respected it, she believed, though she didn't know how long that would last.

The woman left the kitchen and went into the dark front parlor where Benno had turned on the soccer match. The kitchen window was open and sounds of the street filtered up. There was some shuffling, and then Cecilie heard a voice from below, "She's not here. You see, it was a waste of time."

"She couldn't have just disappeared. And she's known to know those jazz people so she might have come here. It makes sense. You'll have to track the rest of them down."

"Me? What about you? And why aren't you going to search the neighborhood more carefully? She could be somewhere around here."

"If you let me finish, that is what I was going to do. This is not my first contract, you know."

They grumbled and she heard footsteps that passed the downstairs entrance. Obviously the Sept brothers searching the area was not going to comb the buildings. Cecilie let out her breath, took the soup plate to the sink and rinsed it. Only then did she dare glance down through the window to the bolted entrance to the Luna Cafe.

The street was empty. There was no sign that the Sept brothers had ever been there. Two teenaged boys came around the corner shouting and jostling each other. She saw Benno come around the corner and a few seconds later heard his heavy steps on the stairs.

The door creaked as he entered the apartment and he spoke in low tones to his mother. Cecilie could hear that they were talking, but their conversations was mostly masked by the announcer calling out soccer plays. The woman came back into the kitchen.

"The nuns have space for you," she said. "You'll have to follow their program, and they are very strict about schooling and work and learning child care. But you are accepted, and Benno will drive you out."

The drive was not long, but very uncomfortable. Benno showered her with disapproval. "It's only because my mother's a saint that I'll help her," he grumbled. "I think you should go home and it's none of our business. At least you didn't take any money. The last person my mother helped out, she gave him a week's worth of grocery money. Then what was I supposed to do? I had to borrow against my pay, but do you think my mother thought of that? Well, she's one of the blessed ones, not like you and I. But let me tell you, you are damned lucky. I only do this because my mother asks, not because I have any sympathies for some tramp who thinks a musician is going to take care of her. I lose girls all the time to musicians. The girls, they always ask me to let them in backstage, for this one's address and that one's favorite coffee, and do they ever talk to me? I get sick of it and I think that all you stupid little whores aren't worth anyone's time. But my mother, I can't say no to her. So here I am driving you out to the country and I'll even try to find your boyfriend. Because the nuns think it's a good idea, and who am I to tell them that musicians are useless fools with more bastards than a nun's got fast days?"

Cecilie could not even enjoy the scenery, the sunlight on the trees and the neat farmhouses with Benno's nonstop litany. She tried to tune him out but she couldn't help registering the words. The anger, the underlying resentment and the threat all came through too clearly.

She was relieved to see the sagging stone convent, to be greeted at the front gate by a woman dressed in a habit exactly the color of the building. It made her think of the Sept House, which for all its danger was still familiar and home.

Benno let her get out by herself and roared off as soon as she had shut the door behind her. The nun who had admitted her spoke as they walked down the polished floors to the office. "You will not find life here easy, but you will be able to live and take care of your baby. And

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if you decide to give him or her up for adoption, we can help you find excellent parents. It is entirely your choice. We don't try to influence you that way. But you must tell your parents where you are and we think it is only right if the father of the child is informed."

The arrived in a place that was very far from any Sept office Cecile had ever seen. This was as sparsely furnished and as serene, but that was where any resemblance ended. There was no silk, no rich color and no lush upholstery here. The furniture was plain, none of the wood inlaid though it shone as perfectly as Signora's Tima's. The only decoration was a crucifix on the wall, and while it was certainly a fine piece of art, Cecile doubted that it had been placed there for aesthetic consideration.

The nun took her seat behind the desk like Signora Tima and called up a large registry form onto the old, utilitarian flat screen. Cecile bit her lip and considered again. It was one thing for the woman who sent her here to be mistaken. It was another for the nuns to believe that she intended to stay more than a few days and to inform her parents where she was. No doubt their kiosk mail accounts were under constant observation.

Worst of all, the registry form was one she had seen before. It was in the datalink. This convent did not have its own physically secured files. Everything they thought was private was easily accessible to the Septs. How else would the Septs ever perform contracts on tracing families for adoptees, medical records for children who never knew their fathers, family histories for those who no longer wanted the secrets protected?

Cecile knew seven easy ways to break this system and ten ways to make it yield information that the nuns barely knew how to access. No, having her on that registry form was as dangerous as standing in the front hall of Sept Sorian and inquiring where the brothers who had her contract were. It was time to tell the truth. Besides, the truth didn't seem quite so alien here with the sunset shadows falling on the whitewashed walls and the far hills already obscured.

"Sister, I am in trouble but not the kind you think," Cecile began. "I'm being pursued. I know a secret that is dangerous and there are dangerous men who would prefer that I weren't free to tell it. My parents' house and mail are being watched. And if you put my name into a public registry they'll find me. I only want to stay a short time, until I can contact the people who can help publish the secret. And then I should be safe again."

The nun looked at her skeptically. "We don't have facilities for dreamers, storytellers or radicals. If you can't contact your parents or put your name in our registry you can't stay. Our mission is to young women who are not prepared to care for their new children, not for girls with paranoid delusions. I'm afraid you'll have to leave."

Cecile began to cry. She didn't know where the tears came from, only that they kept coming and she couldn't stop them. She hadn't had a chance to acknowledge her situation, and suddenly she realized that she was going to be cold and hungry and there was no place she could go to spend the night. It was late in the afternoon and soon the sun would set and it would be dinner time and she had no where to go and no one she could trust.

"Please, can't I stay here just tonight?" she begged. "I'll go in the morning, I promise you. But I need a place where no one will look for me tonight."

"Isn't there anyone you can ask?" the nun asked awkwardly. Obviously she was ill at ease with Cecile's display.

Cecile shook her head.

The nun looked distraught. Then she seemed to make up her mind. "Only one night. And that's only because it's too late to take the bus into town and I just can't turn you out on the street. And we do have an extra bed. But you'll have to leave tomorrow. You may use my mail, if you like. If you think yours is being watched," the nun offered. "You can stay here in the office and wait for replies."

Cecile nodded her head, afraid to speak. She wanted to throw her arms around the nun and sob into her faded blue workshirt. At very least with the convent header rather than her own, she could contact her parents and David. She was safe. At least for the night.

She wrote the message to David first, hoping that he'd have some idea of where she could go. Then she wrote a longer note to her mother, explaining that she was okay and out of town for a few days on business and that she would be leaving this convent very soon.

She re-read the letter and was disappointed. She hadn't managed to say what she wanted to say and she was afraid of giving too much away. She tried to fix it, but the changes only made the thing worse. Finally she gave up and sent it. When Cecile looked up the nun was gone.

A girl in a neat white dress brought up a tray with coffee and a sandwich, tomato and cheese on crusty convent-made bread. The girl set it on the desk. "Sister Paul said she thought you'd be hungry and couldn't wait for dinner. That's at seven. But the nuns are really nice here. They've helped me and Aemilia a lot. I didn't know what I was going to do, my mother kicked me out of the house. Said I was a tramp. And Marco, well..." The girl made a face.

"Anyway, Sister said you might be hungry waiting for your messages. Since you didn't have lunch. Don't fill up, though, because we're having rabbit and tortellini tonight for dinner. Sister Maria Francisco is doing it in rosemary now. She's the best cook."

"Thank you," Cecile said. "I'll look forward to dinner. It's been a long time since I've had rabbit in rosemary." Then she hesitated. She couldn't believe that the convent would really have a dreambox. But if it did she might be able to steal in through their keys and get hold of David, or get hold of somebody.

With a convent origin she might even be able to penetrate certain of the Sept Sorian files she remembered. They wouldn't have a flag on an obscure convent catering to pregnant teenagers.

The girl stood and studied her. "You know, I don't have any idea," she said slowly. "I can't imagine what the runs would do with one. But ask Sister Teresa, she's the extern sister. And she's really nice. I'm Bianca. If you want to come out tonight, Tonia and I are going shopping at a mall nearby. You could come along if you like."

Cecile shook her head mutely. She couldn't imagine taking a ride with this girl any more than she could face the fact that she was out of Venice. Out of Venice for the first time in her life, except on a properly arranged holiday. This was her very first real adventure and all she wished was that it had never happened, that she would wake up in her own bed and this would all be some idiotic dream that would fade out of her nice everyday life. And she knew that she might as well wish to be the Queen of England.

The girl left. Cecile sipped the coffee, which was weak. She nibbled on the sandwich, which was good. She wasn't hungry but attacking the food was something to do that would use up time until she got her replies. Soon the tray was empty. She nosed around the office, but there was nothing lying out on any of the surfaces, not a book, no pictures, nothing at all to take her mind off the lingering seconds.

Interface Masque—Part III

Images of the Sept brother following her formed in her mind. She had to stop it now or she'd be lost, crazed, too frightened to think or to move. She tried to calm herself and it was no good, all she could think about were the killers after her and after all of them. Visions of the Board meeting with Sept Sorian in strong attendance haunted her. She thought Signora Tima would be in danger for delivering the Sept Fortune position.

What was the Sept-Fortune position? Cecilie wondered vaguely. She had no position at all, and no one had talked about one in her presence, as if it was a foregone conclusion that the Board would be able to coordinate the various specialties of the Septs into a single unit. As one they would not have to listen to anyone. They would be ultimately free—or so the story went.

What really would happen was that Sept Sorian would take over. Cecilie did not doubt that Signora Tima recognized that goal and did not approve. Signora Tima and Sept-Fortune would lead the opposition to Sept Sorian, and they would all pay for it.

The tone of a deep bell called Cecilie from her reverie. At first she ignored it, thinking that it must mark the Sisters' chapel duty or some esoteric convent thing. When it chimed again she realized that it came from the interface speaker. Obviously the nun had changed the usual biffs and beeps into something more suited to the environment. Cecilie smiled—the nun must not have been a complete recluse all her life.

Cecilie looked at the text scan. Two messages. One was from David. Oh, great, as if he'd have anything useful to say. He'd gotten her into this mess, it was his problem. It should be his problem.

Meet me at the place where I first met you and you hated me at ten tonight.

Grudgingly she approved. He had given nothing away to their enemies. Only how was she going to get out there by ten? Did the nuns have a dreambox? She doubted it seriously, but she would ask. If they, did who knew what kind of shape it was in. She would be lucky if they had one at all.

She sighed. It all felt stupid and difficult and she wished she hadn't gotten this far away. She wished that Benno had delivered a message on paper and that she was somewhere she could rest. She stood up. Her jeans bagged around her knees and her blouse looked like she had slept in it. She dragged her fingers through her hair, trying to separate the knots. They wouldn't give.

The computer chimed again. The other message didn't like being ignored. It had no origin in the header—something that a Sept brother or sister could forge without thinking, but would be impossible for anyone outside to manipulate. Or so Cecilie had thought. She herself had learned to forge headers by the time she was twelve. It had been great fun for a while.

She was afraid to open the mail. It could be a trace, set to alert the sender when it was accessed, and where. And Cecilie had no doubt that it was from Sept Sorian.

But it was safer for her to crase it here than to let it sit and fester in her queue. After all, it could be rigged to log the rest of her mail too. Certainly the Sept brothers on the other side would see how long it took for her to read it. Better to read it here, where she was leaving very soon, rather than wait until she was in some place she might stay long enough to be found.

The letter did not resolve into text on the screen. Instead it showed a series of graphics, strange juxtaposed images that almost made sense to Cecilie. A seascape with buoys marked with numbers that changed filled the space, and then the fish and data packets convened around a lighthouse that Cecilie recognized.

Not one she had used in many years, but a secret meeting point she had had with Julieta when they were going through a phase of hating

Valentina. A lighthouse in the infocsea that was half torn down and where unclaimed bays lay resident for ages until they were summoned again. It had been an eerie place.

Once she had thought of making it scarier, and maybe adding a ghost or two, until she learned that the underlying programming for this level had been burned in. There was probably some way to change it, but at fifteen it had been hardly worth the effort just to add a finishing touch to an already exquisite atmosphere.

The image shook her. Was Sept Sorian telling her that they knew her most intimate secrets? That they knew more of her history than she cared to remember?

But then, why was her mother's kitchen table in the scene and what was an entire collection of doorknobs doing arranged on the walls like a museum display?

Museum display. This message was not from Sept Sorian at all. This had to be the aliens.

Cecilie was disoriented. She grasped the corner of the desk to steady herself even though she was quite firmly seated in the hard-bottomed convent chair. The anomaly, the aliens, had contacted her. What did they know of her and what were they trying to do? She didn't understand what the message meant and she didn't understand why they had sent it at all. But there was more communication here than before; clearly the visitor was learning rapidly.

She searched the image, turning it this way and that trying to get a new angle trying to see what the various additions to the scene could possibly communicate. Besides the kitchen table and the doorknobs were randomly placed feathers. Zizi's feathers. She had collected them and saved them but she didn't know how they could help her.

Or maybe the image meant Zizi itself. Only Zizi was dead and gone and there was no other. But Zizi had known things and had hidden them.

Then Cecilie began to smile. The message was a pointer and it made perfect sense. Either the aliens had made far more out of her visits than she had realized, or they knew more about the human organization of thought than she recognized from their own levels of organization of data. In any case, they had contacted her and told her something that could be useful.

Zizi had known everything about her, had known all her haunts and habits. And Zizi was a bird, which meant it had liked to take small shiny things and hide them away. A lot of packets on the datastream level were bright and small, perfect for Zizi's beak. The familiar would have hidden them somewhere she could find the data, just the way Zizi always put findings into a folder in her private space. The bird program had been her familiar and had known her better than any other being in existence.

She had never known that Zizi had instincts to grab random data. Or maybe it wasn't random at all. Maybe it was bits of things she had asked about and had not bothered with again, things that she had not pursued.

Suddenly she was anxious to get to the infocsea and find what treasure the alien pointers had indicated. Perhaps it was nothing. She told herself this to try and calm down, to think that maybe the answer was not waiting perfect and whole hidden in the datasea.

She turned off the text reader and went in search of Sister Teresa, praying only that the convent had a dreambox. That was the only way she could do everything she had to do and cover or burn her tracers. If only the nuns had a dreambox.

Wishing alone was pointless. She would find Sister Teresa. If the convent didn't have a dreambox then she'd figure out the next thing to do.



Book Reviews

Reviews by Lucas Gregor:

***The Dead Past* by Tom Piccirilli**
Write Way Publishing, Hardcover, 211 pages, \$21.95; ISBN 1-885173-28-8

A new Piccirilli novel is always cause for rejoicing, and *The Dead Past* is no exception. I was blown away by this marvelous book.

The novel opens with Jonathan Kendrick being woken up in the middle of the night by a phone call from his grandmother, who has just discovered a dead body in her trash can. Typically, Piccirilli's protagonists tend to be flawed and tortured: Kendrick, however, isn't. It was quite interesting for me to see him handle a strong, unflawed protagonist.

This is probably Piccirilli's best paced novel. I sat down to read the first chapter and ended up finishing the book in one sitting. Once Piccirilli has you in his grasp he doesn't let go. If you like mysteries, pick this one up.

***Sorcerers of Majipoor* by Robert Silverberg**
HarperPrism, Hardcover, 480 pages, \$23.00; ISBN 0-06-105254-X

Lord Valentine's Castle was one of my favorite novels, so I was very excited to receive this novel. The first chapter was more than a bit slow, and the writing seemed forced at times. I continued to read because I trust Silverberg. Fortunately, I was rewarded, as the novel turned out to be a good read. *Sorcerers* takes place a thousand years before *Lord Valentine's Castle*, with, of course, a completely different cast.

The novel opens with the current Pontifex on his death bed. The present Coronal, Lord Confalume, has chosen Prince Prestimion to be the next Coronal. Several people believe that the Coronal's son, Korsibar, would be a better choice. This, however, is forbidden by Majipoor tradition. Through some duplicitous actions, Korsibar manages to seize the throne and events take over from there. Korsibar, as it turns out, is a greater man than those around him think, but unfortunately, not half the man that he believes he is.

Silverberg's return to Majipoor is a triumphant one.

***The Howling Stones* by Alan Dean Foster**
Del Rey, Hardcover, 331 pages, \$22.50; ISBN 0-345-38375-3

The Howling Stones is the newest Humanx Commonwealth novel. Foster takes us on a wild ride this time out. The Commonwealth is having problems negotiating with the people of a newly discovered planet; since no one communicates with aliens as well as Pulickel Tomocheloh, he soon finds himself on Senisran trying to forge an alliance with the natives.

The book got off to a slow start, but by the end of the first chapter I was hooked. If you're looking for a novel with a sense of wonder, this is it.

***The Seer King* by Chris Bunch**
Aspect, Trade Paper, 519 pages, \$13.99; ISBN 0-446-67282-3

Gritty, realistic high fantasy is not a thing that I've ever run into before, but that is exactly what *The Seer King* is. Bunch does a masterful job of bringing a mature element to fantasy. This is the first heroic fantasy novel that I've enjoyed in quite some time. However, I wouldn't recommend it for anyone under the age of twelve. This is a novel for mature readers.

The Seer King chronicles the rise to power of Damasters, a cavalry officer, and Tenedos, a wizard. Both have managed to offend important people and are sent off on a mission that they are not expected to return from. The two form an immediate bond and together seem unstoppable. Damasters narrates the story from a prison cell. He makes it clear that he has been betrayed by Tenedos, but never gives the particulars. And we don't find out in this novel what happened to land him in prison. *The Seer King* is the first volume in a trilogy. I'm anxious for the next one. Bunch has hit a home run this time out.

***Destiny's Road* by Larry Niven**
Tor, Hardcover, 352 pages, \$24.95; ISBN 0-312-85122-7

The promotional material that came with *Destiny's Road* stated that it's Niven's best book ever. I wouldn't go that far, but it's a

damn fine novel. As one would expect from Niven, the science is hard and the characters are well rounded. *Destiny* is almost as interesting a world as Ringworld.

Jeremy Blocher is leading a quiet life as a farmer on *Destiny* when he accidentally kills a merchant and must run to escape punishment. He travels down *Destiny's Road* and discovers many grand things about his world. Ultimately he discovers a dark secret, one that he must see right, and in doing so he frees all of *Destiny*.

This one's a page turner and well worth the read.

Reviews by Joe Mayhew:

***Catch the Lightning* by Catherine Asaro**
Tor, Hardcover, 352 pages, \$24.95; ISBN 0-312-86043-9

Continuing in her unique mix of nuts-and-bolts SF, bodice ripper romance, and heroic space adventure, Catherine Asaro brings Tina Pulivok, a teenage, Mexican empath living in L.A., into contact with the Skolian Empire of her first Tor novel, *Primary Inversion*. Tina is rescued from a gang of thugs by a tall, metal-hued stranger named Althor, who, in the best pulp tradition, turns out to be a "Jagernaut," as well as a telepathic cyborg and an empathic Skolian prince. He's on Earth because his "Jag" (near-sentient space-fighter) has been sabotaged. In fact, he's on the wrong Earth, in the wrong universe, and in a heap of trouble. He is a cyborg because of his extensive genetic defects—due largely to the "Kyle" mutant genes which make him able to surf the psibernet (an instantaneous telepathic galactic communications field). Tina, a full-blooded Maya, turns out to be from the same racial stock as Althor, possessing telepathic genes but not those from Althor's defective gene-pool. She is the one-in-a-billion chance his race, and the civilization they protect from the pain-vampire "Trackers," have of survival. If this sounds a bit like super-hero comic book stuff—it is! And Catherine Asaro keeps the wonders tumbling along at the level of sheer delight.

She draws her readers into strange intimacies with hard sciences from speculative

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physics to developmental biology, while inserting genuinely feminine romance, color, and detail. Asaro writes from a woman's point of view, but in a way which will surely capture rugged action adventure lovers.

***How Like a God* by Brenda W. Clough**
 Tor, Hardcover, 287 pages. \$22.95; ISBN
 0-312-86263-6

While this is a book about a man selected, like some modern day Enkidu, to be soul-brother to the ancient demi-god Gilgamesh, and thus technically fantasy, it has the feel of science fiction in that the supernatural powers are treated with the same analytic and responsible economy one might expect from the wonderstuff of science.

The hero, Rob Lewis, a computer programmer living with his wife and kids in the Virginia suburbs of Washington, DC, finds that he has somehow acquired substantial power over people's minds. At first he uses it casually, but soon realizes that his powers are expanding dangerously. He is a man with a strong conscience and is shocked by his wife, who, upon learning the extent of his powers, decides he should at the very least become President or rule the world. Moreover, when he determines that his proximity is causing abnormal development in his twin babies, it scares him into running away. He lands in New York City and lives as a predator on whomever he wishes, turning into a bum. However, his conscience catches up with him as he begins to rape the floozy teenage daughter of one of his mesmerized hosts. He can't go through with it, and flees again. This time, he lands in the company of Dr. Edwin Amadeus Barbarossa, a neurobiologist at the National Institute of Mental Health. Dr. Barbarossa approaches Rob's problem with scientific analysis and experimental research. They go off to Atlantic City's gambling dens not to make a fortune but to study Rob's mysterious powers. While the money does come in handy, and the hostile attention of casino mobsters provides exciting challenges, he is increasingly disturbed by intrusive visions connected to some barren place in the steppes of central Asia called Aquebin. He has to go there, and his own personal Enkidu, Dr. Barbarossa, decides to go with him, where they meet the immortal Gilgamesh.

This story rolls flawlessly on polished ball-bearings, combining subtle wit and acute

observation which give a remarkable feeling of reality and vivid adventure. It doesn't take the easy or predictable turns in its telling, and while Edwin Barbarossa is a bit of a charming eccentric, he is always a believable scientist. The real struggle in this book is within Rob's character. Brenda Clough has made his extraordinary situation one that you can touch with your fingers and extend into your own personal world.

Reviews by John Deacons:

***Interesting Times: A Novel of Discworld* by Terry Pratchett**
 HarperPrism, Hardcover, 295 pages,
 \$22.00; ISBN 0-06-105252-3

"May you live in interesting times"—Oriental curse. Terry Pratchett, the master of hilarious fantasy, is back with another one. Rincewind, Discworld's most cowardly and inept magician, is back. He disappeared at the end of *Sourcery*, five years and ten novels ago, with the sound of rodent-like footsteps fleeing into the Dark Dimensions, a pack of monsters on his heels. The gap between copyright date and release date may indicate that this novel may have been delayed while Pratchett explored other Discworld sub-plots. The wait was worth it. Despite having the survival skills of a lemming who calls in sick the day of the Big Migration, Rincewind is yanked from a safe desert island and flung to the Counterweight Continent by the staff of Unseen University. That land is a fantasy blend of imperial China and Japan, with millions of downtrodden (but obedient) peasants, scheming Oriental war-lords, and even a polite Red Army ("Timely Demise to the Enemies of the People's Endeavor, While Maintaining Our Traditions!").

Joining him in invading the Forbidden City of Hungbung is ninety-five-year-old Cohen the Barbarian and the Silver Horde, the seven oldest barbarian heroes, including a retired teacher who has never held a sword. "... the privation, the terrible hazards, the daily risk of death..." "Oh, you've been a teacher, have you?" Twoflower, Rincewind's confused client from the initial Discworld books, and his murderous sapient Luggage, reappear. The supporting cast of peasants, evil overlords, eunuchs, and magical terra cotta warriors numbers in the millions.

Terry Pratchett has a way of looking sideways at every myth, institution, and ethnic group. Rincewind again accidentally saves the world, while only trying to avoid danger. He ends up on the mysterious island XXXX, where the natives call men "blokes" and throw sticks that come back to you. I can hardly wait for the next one!

***The Blackgod: Chosen of the Changeling-Book Two* by J. Gregory Keyes**
 Ballantine Books, Hard Cover, 576 pages,
 \$24.00; ISBN 0-345-40394-0

Keyes' first major release, *The Waterborn*, received my first perfect rating. The sequel, *Blackgod*, is outstanding in its own right. Sequels are plagued by the need to have read the earlier volume(s). That is not so much a problem with *Blackgod*. Furthermore, the ending is a real ending, with the door left open only a crack for its own sequel.

The inner lives of characters, who rode the external wave of action in the first book, are developed in depth. One of the most fascinating is Ghe, the climbed-from-poverty, clerical assassin, resurrected by the River god himself, to combat the very priesthood who trained him. His battle to retain even a fraction of his humanity in the face of personal ghoullhood is compounded by his distorted memory of love for Hezhi, the river's runaway avatar. Hezhi, struggling to become herself, confronts multitudes of aggressive godlings. She has no choice but to become a medicine woman of the barbarian Mang in self defense.

Lesser characters fall away, leaving the stage for the internal and external battles of Perkar, the guilt-ridden warrior/hero; Tsem, the half-giant; Brother Horse, the Mang shaman; Nganta, the forest hybrid; and Ghan, the librarian. Each has the potential of a sole protagonist, but Keyes weaves them into an intense tapestry of bold threads. All become, to some degree, the pawns of maneuvering godlings, and each free will struggles against his or her puppet destiny. If the book has a theme, that is it; however, the reader is not beaten insensible with the moral of the story.

If this work has a flaw, it is Keyes' reluctance to kill off the second- or third-lead characters, into whom he has poured so much of himself. The flavor of Navajo mythology that permeates his work is unique to the sword-and-sorcery genre. The reader will be

Absolute Magnitude

eager for more from the same universe.

The Thousand Cities: Book Three of the Time of Troubles by Harry Turtledove
Del Rey, Hardcover, 404 pages;
ISBN 0-345-38049-5

Turtledove returns to his favorite fantasy universe, before the "Videssos" series and after the time of his "Krispos" series. He last offered *Hammer and Anvil*. This third book revisits the protagonists of Book One, *The Stolen Throne*. Since that novel was the better of the first two, *The Thousand Cities* is more satisfying than *Hammer*.

Turtledove has created a medieval mix between Crusader Europe and Persian Middle East. The heavy-cavalry Makurans follow the Prophets Four in the "thousand cities" between the Tib and Tatub Rivers (similar to the Tigris/Euphrates delta). Noblewomen spend their lives in a harem. Rule is by the King of Kings, an eastern imperial potentate.

Their enemies, the Videssans, are Roman-like imperials, followers of the one god, Phos. The Videssans, central to the second book, are the continual (off-stage) complication of this text.

Abivard, son of Godarz, struggled through *Stolen Throne* to place his future brother-in-law on the Makuran throne. As Marshall of Makura, he now exists in and out of favor with that king. As in the last days of imperial Rome, a too-successful general in the emperor's service becomes suspect of future imperial ambitions. Abivard spends this book battling the King's enemies, marching and counter-marching, or living under house arrest. The reader will strongly suspect that he will someday turn on the idiot whom he helped crown and become King of Kings himself.

Turtledove's depth of historical knowledge shines through everywhere, especially in the three-cornered relationship of an emperor, his imperial cities, and his army. The fantasy reader may miss heavy reliance on magic, which is present in small doses only. It pivots the lengthy plot only once. Nevertheless, Turtledove again confirms himself as the master of alternate-universe fantasy fiction. We are ready for Book Four.

Eternity Road by Jack McDevitt
HarperPrism, Hardcover, 338 pages;
ISBN 0-06-105208-6

Having just labored for weeks through another book, with joy I sailed through *Eternity Road* in three days.

In the mid-twenty-first century, world society collapsed when ninety-nine percent of the population died of a viral plague. Centuries later, civilized confederated cities are slowly expanding out of the Mississippi Valley. The ruins of the Roadmakers are everywhere, but only a handful of hand-copied books survive from the technological age. Legend has it that somewhere Haven exists, a repository of knowledge collected by the plague's last survivors. A decade ago, the uncommunicative sole survivor of a failed Haven expedition returned. With his death comes evidence that the previous expedition did find Haven.

A motley group of scholars and adventurers sets out on a second quest, through ruins, barbarians, other nascent civilizations, and the surviving technological ghosts of long-dead ancestors. It is a great deal of fun. (And, yes, of course they find Haven.) There are enough surprises to keep you turning pages to the end. In the morning-after glow, McDevitt seems like a wonderful writer.

Wait a second! I never really believed in his adventuresome female protagonist; she couldn't have arisen from his future society. The characters are killed off at exactly the expected rate of a "B" western, leaving just enough alive to finish the quest. Technology that has survived is unlikely to have done so. The party could not have reached their goal without using some super-tech stun guns (a.k.a. *deus ex machina*). The evidence that they needed to keep Haven from almost killing them had been too conveniently erased in only ten years. Give me a break: Everybody speaks the same language, after centuries apart?

You will love McDevitt's writing, as I did, but this book will not respect you in the morning.

Legacy by Greg Bear
Tor Books, Hardcover, 349 pages, \$21.95;
ISBN 0-312-85516-8

Legacy claims to be "the stunning prequel to Eon." Perhaps I should have approached Bear's work first through his other well-known offerings. He has elsewhere described the hollow asteroid, Thistledown; Axis City, the launching point for the Way;

the Way itself, a navigable phenomenon that cuts through space and time; and the Jarts, alien enemies encountered in the Way. Little of *Legacy* is spent with any of those.

Olmy Ap Semon is sent to investigate a breakaway group of Naderites who exiled themselves to the earth-like planet Lamarckia, somewhere along the Way. Bear's Lamarckian ecology is brilliant: the living community within each ecosystem is a single, enormous organism. Each island is a single entity; each continent has only a few; one is a self-cycling ocean storm/creature.

The human invaders, who barely survived starvation and allergic reactions, have come to terms with the various Zones. They have not come to terms with each other. Prosperity was not equally distributed; all were not granted equality, especially women forced into child-bearing; pre-existing factions split the colonists into hostile camps who will do anything to keep their own group alive.

From that promising beginning, the author then sinks the reader in a morass of overdrawn self-analysis, mind-numbing description, and politically correct action so slow to develop that you won't care what happens, if something just will. If there is a plot, it is so murky and slow moving that even Bear flashes forward to the story's end forty pages before the rest of us to escape. Objectively, there is a great deal of movie-quality action, but never once does the writer make us care about it. It is like a movie made up only of special effects and narration.

Leave early. I had to stay for three weeks to slog through this one.

Review by Pam Meek:
Beam Me Up, Scotty, by Peter David
Pocket books, 215 pages, paperback,
\$12.00; ISBN 0-471-52056-3

As a rule I don't enjoy biographies, but I was pleasantly surprised by the newest in a long line of *Star Trek* biographies. James Doohan's sense of humor merges flawlessly with the dry wit of Peter David.

Doohan's life is much richer than one might imagine. Throughout the book he remains honest, looking back on his mistakes and successes with a reflective amusement. He is up front about his beginnings in the *Star Trek* universe, his friendships, and his conflicts with co-workers. He is matter of fact and succinct about his well publicized

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differences with William Shatner, while remaining strong in his praise of the cast as a whole. Doohan also provides an absolutely fascinating look at his favorite and least favorite episodes of *Star Trek*, adding a number of inside anecdotes that will leave the reader smiling. His friendship with Gene Roddenberry offers intriguing insights into the creator of *Star Trek*, making this book an absolute must read for any *Star Trek* aficionado.

Review by Kevin Rogers:

3001: The Final Odyssey by Arthur C. Clarke
Del Rey, Hardcover, 263 pages, \$25.00;
ISBN 0-345-31522-7

If you have never read one of Arthur C. Clarke's books, you are missing a feast of ideas. This book is the fourth of the *Odyssey* series. Clarke insists that you don't need to have read any of the previous works to enjoy this one, but I would encourage you to read *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *2010: Odyssey Two* first. The books and the movies are bona fide science fiction classics; you'll be a better person for the experience. While Clarke provides enough background that the uninitiated won't be lost, it's not the same, and it's fascinating to see how Clarke has built upon his original framework while still creating something new.

The year is 3001. Frank Poole, Dave Bowman's unfortunate shipmate who was killed by the computer HAL in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, is discovered floating frozen beyond the orbit of Neptune after drifting for 1,000 years. Through the use of science, which to a 20th century reader indeed seems like magic, Frank is revived and finds himself a celebrated stranger in a strange land. The millennium since the ignition of Lucifer has been a fruitful one for mankind. Ills such as crime, poverty, pollution, and that general form of insanity commonly known as Religion have been largely conquered. Large-scale terraforming projects are well underway. Humanity has long since accepted the concept that "we are not alone," and indeed, has found the knowledge liberating. Europa is still unapproachable, but scientists have become content to observe the incipient civilization of the amphibians via telescope. Indeed, it seems that Frank has been reborn

into a society that approaches utopia. Can he find a place in this "world gone sane"?

This book is a showcase for Clarke's unflinching optimism as to the power of reason and the ultimate potential of humankind. Like most novels of the utopian vein, a large portion of the text is devoted to giving us "the grand tour." Having Frank, a 20th century man, as the viewpoint character gives Clarke a convenient excuse for explaining all of the mundane and petty details of the world of the future. If that were the end of it, if the story went no further than providing a framework for Clarke's essays on human evolution, I would still recommend this book. However, there is much more to the story; the fate of humanity is at stake. It seems that the Firstborn, the creators of the monoliths which gave rise to the experiment of humanity, run all of their tests pass/fail. I won't go into the details, but I can assure you that the series begun by *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *2010: Odyssey Two* is brought to a glorious conclusion by this book.

Review by Angela Kessler:

The Killing Dance by Laurel K. Hamilton
Ace, Paperback, 387 pages, \$6.50;
ISBN 0-441-00452-0

Being the editor of a vampire magazine can occasionally make you feel jaded and cynical. So it's a great pleasure when a book like this comes along and reminds you why you fell in love with vampires in the first place.

Laurel Hamilton blends vampires, werewolves, blood, and sex into a delicious and intoxicating cocktail. She has a gift for creating gorgeous, powerful male characters who ooze sensuality. Two of them—Richard, an alpha werewolf, and Jean-Claude, Master vampire of St. Louis—happen to be dating the novel's tough-yet-feminine heroine, Anita Blake (a professional necromancer and vampire executioner). Dating the two of them makes it understandably difficult for Anita to keep her head clear, so she refuses to sleep with either one of them until she decides between them. All of this was established in the earlier novels; this is the one where she finally makes up her mind. Each of the novels stands alone and all are well worth reading, so if you missed them, go back and pick them up; besides, you'll appreciate the sexual tension more if you watch it build over the course of several novels!

I have to say that the ten-page scene near the end of the book where she chooses her lover—and carries through on her promise—is absolutely the hottest scene I have ever read anywhere. I would say that Hamilton should take up writing erotica, but this scene qualifies in and of itself. But don't get the impression that the sex is the only action in this book; on the contrary, there's plenty of violence and bloodshed throughout as Anita struggles to survive the contract that's been put out on her life. And I found it fascinating to try to figure out who she would choose, and why: which "monster" she has, in the end, become the most like.



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